

# Body Image and Aging

## College women's perceptions versus older women's experiences

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### Introduction

The face of the American population is literally changing. Crow's feet, laugh lines and age spots are becoming more commonplace as the baby boomers grow older and the average life span increases. The oldest boomers reached the age of 50 in 1996; an age that has been redefined as middle youth in lieu of middle age. Currently, the fastest growing age group is composed of individuals 85 and over (1), yet the United States is still referred to as a "youth culture." Americans worship beauty and youth and identify aging as a process to be avoided and fought as long as possible. Baby boomers are the most successful and educated cohort group and have created a huge market for anti-aging products and procedures (2). Wrinkle creams, chemical peels, hair coloring, cosmetics and cosmetic surgery are advertised pervasively in the print and television media. The message, especially for women, is to do everything possible to stay young and beautiful.

The cultural body ideal has become taller and thinner over time (3). Aging, however, is a slow, gradual process that affects every individual and results in obvious physical changes that often are incompatible with cultural conceptions of beauty. The physical signs of aging occur at different rates according to each individual's unique genetic and

environmental background, but the changes are inevitable. Thus, an aging population is faced with living in a culture that is obsessed with youth, beauty and thinness, with diminishing ability to achieve or maintain appearance ideals. A battle against aging often ensues as a result of the growing discrepancy between how people see themselves and how they would like to look. Across age groups, this actual-ideal body image discrepancy is associated with the development and maintenance of body image disturbance and eating disorders (4). Some individuals may attempt to cope by embracing the belief that "you're as old as you feel" and denying their increasing years.

However, Montepare and Lachman (5) have found that older women who maintain younger age identities report less life satisfaction than those with smaller discrepancies between chronological and subjective age.

Cultural ideals are communicated through television, movies and the print media. Research has found that older people, especially females, are underrepresented in the media in proportion to their numbers in the population, and

they are portrayed unrealistically when they do appear (6). In fact, interviews with a number of editors of women's magazines revealed that signs of aging are routinely deleted from photographs through computer imaging, thus making a 60-year-old woman appear to look 45 (7). Even magazines that target middle-aged and older women rarely use women of their targeted age on their covers, in fashion and beauty sections or in advertisements.

Physical appearance not only affects how people feel about themselves, but

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also how they are perceived and treated by others (8). Unfortunately, for the elderly, the reflection of age on physical appearance may have negative consequences (9,10). Overt and subtle feedback regarding physical appearance has been shown to influence levels of body image dissatisfaction and overall self-esteem (11). Past research also suggests that the label "senior citizen" is associated with having less to offer society (12) and that

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people across all age groups (including older people) tend to view elderly appearance negatively (13). As a result, the elderly population may attempt to avoid being viewed as "old" by employing various strategies to keep a youthful appearance and maintain social acceptance (14). Negative stereotypes of the elderly may, therefore, be partially responsible for the increasing popularity of products and cosmetic surgeries that help fight the aging process.

Although the aging process is not gender specific, its effects appear to have a more profound impact on women. Our pilot work in this area has revealed that, compared with men, women report that age-related changes in appearance, such as decreased muscle

tone, increased body fat and change in posture, play a more important role in how they feel about their appearance. Further, older women report that these physical changes make them feel much less satisfied with their appearance than men feel.

### Method

All participants completed a 10-page questionnaire that included measures of body image-related attitudes, concerns and behaviors related to aging, as well as peer dieting, eating disorder symptoms and depression. The specific measures were the Body Image and Aging Survey (BIAS), designed to assess the anticipated impact of age-related changes on

psychosocial functioning and satisfaction with appearance, projected use of strategies to slow or hide the physical signs of aging and potential methods for coping

with the aging process. Two versions of the BIAS were used for the study: one was designed to assess college females' attitudes about *future* changes in physical appearance, and the other was a present-tense version that assessed older women's *current* experiences with and perceptions of age-related changes in appearance. Also administered were the Peer Dieting Survey (17) to assess friends' interest in dieting, weight and body image; the Eating Disorders Inventory-II Bulimia and Drive for Thinness Subscales (18) to assess level of eating disorder symptomatology and investment in being thin; and the Zung Self-Rating Depression Inventory (19) to assess current levels of depression. A subsample of the participants also completed an exercise record to assess the

frequency (days/week), duration (hours/week), and intensity (1 = very low intensity to 5 = very high intensity) of current levels of exercise, as well as the participants' projected exercise levels 5, 10 and 20 years from now.

### Sample

Participants in two age cohorts completed the questionnaires. The first cohort consisted of 290 female undergraduates enrolled at a large open-enrollment university in the southeast United States. Students received extra credit for their voluntary participation. A second comparison group consisted of 73 older women who belonged to a senior community center in central Florida.

The 202 college females (average age of 21.7 years) were predominantly Caucasian (73.8 percent), followed by Latino (13.9 percent) and African-American (4.5 percent). Their average Body Mass Index (BMI) was 22.3 (considered within the normal range), and less than 20 percent had current health problems. Eighty-five college females completed the exercise record and reported exercising on an average of 2.4 days per week, with 17.7 percent exercising on more than four days per week, 51.8 percent exercising on between 1 and 4 days, and 30.5 percent describing themselves as inactive.

The older comparison group included 49 women (average age of 70 years) and was also predominantly Caucasian (94 percent). The average BMI of this sample was 27.6 (considered in the overweight range) and over half reported medical problems associated with aging (51 percent). This group was included in the current study to compare their body image experiences and concerns with the college females' projected levels of concern and overall perceptions of age-related changes in appearance.

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tone, increased body fat and change in posture, play a more important role in how they feel about their physical appearance. Further, older women report that these physical changes make them feel much less satisfied with their appearance than men feel.

Perceptions of aging and its potential impact on daily functioning have also been the focus of research with young adults who have not only reported a general fear of aging (15), but have also identified physical signs of aging as a source of anxiety and fear (16). It is important for researchers to continue work in this area to identify and address perceptions and fears of aging, as our population will continue to age and struggle to keep a positive self-image. The aim of the current study was to fur-

**Table 1— Current and Projected Levels of Exercise among College Women**

	Last week	2 weeks ago	5 years from now	10 years from now	20 years from now
Days	2.4	2.4	3.7	3.3	2.8
Hours	3.3	3.4	3.4	2.9	2.7
Intensity Level*	2.8	2.8	3.3	3.0	2.7

\*Intensity level was rated on a scale of 1 (very low intensity) to 5 (very high intensity).

## Results

### *Female Students' Perceptions of Aging*

Results of the BIAS indicated that college females thought that the physical signs of aging will be important in determining their future body satisfaction. The majority of female students rated hair loss (92.5 percent), sagging breasts (88.6 percent), decreased muscle tone (86.7 percent) and developing lines and wrinkles (84.7 percent) as important in determining how they will feel about their physical appearance as they age. Eighty-three percent of college females reported that experiencing these changes will make them much less satisfied with their appearance. A large percentage of college females were also likely to believe that age-related changes in physical appearance will negatively impact their future self-confidence (65.5 percent), romance and sexuality (67.3 percent) and overall mood (51.3 percent). Many college females reported that, as a result of the aging process, they will worry about how they look in the future (71.4 percent) and will focus on aspects other than appearance (58.8 percent) or picture themselves at a younger age (29.8 percent).

Consistent with their negative perceptions of aging, many of these young women indicated that they are likely to make significant efforts to hide the signs of growing older. College women re-

ported that they will wear shorts and bathing suits less often (84 percent), feel self-conscious when undressing (59.3 percent) and have their pictures taken less often (39.5 percent). Approximately 75 percent of the college women reported that they would consider some type of cosmetic surgery, notably varicose vein removal (43 percent), liposuction (32.3 percent) and breast implants (28.7 percent) to maintain their youthful appearance. Other, less invasive strategies considered were skipping meals (47.1 percent), using diet pills (37.6 percent) and using liquid substitutes for meals (25.9 percent). In accordance with their willingness to undergo surgical procedures and modify their diets, these young women also currently spend an average of \$829 a year on anti-aging and camouflaging products such as hair coloring, fade and wrinkle creams and makeup. However, when asked about other, more natural strategies to maintain a healthy appearance and body as they age, only 13 percent plan to stay out of the sun, 36 percent anticipate eating a healthy diet and 36 percent plan to exercise regularly. College women expect that, as they age, they will evaluate their attractiveness by comparing themselves to friends (59.2 percent), models and actors (44.8 percent) and relatives (42.3 percent) of the same age.

Sixty-eight percent of the college

females reported that appearance will be important to them in older adulthood. Given their many concerns about looking older, it is clear that coping with age-related changes in appearance will be important. A majority of them indicated that they will use humor (99.5 percent), seek support from others (96.4 percent) and focus on aspects other than their appearance (94.6 percent) to cope.

### *College Females' Current and Projected Levels of Exercise*

Whereas over 28 percent of the college females reported exercising on at least four days per week at a moderate intensity, over half (57.8 percent) reported moderate to high difficulty in maintaining a regular exercise pattern. The most widely reported forms of exercise included walking (21.2 percent), running (12.9 percent), rollerblading (8.2 percent) and weight lifting (7.2 percent). The 45.9 percent of females who reported exercising with a friend or family member did so on an average of 2.9 days per week for 4.6 hours, which was significantly more than those who exercised alone (average of 2.0 days and 2.3 hours).

College women predicted that their exercise frequency over the next 20 years will be higher than it currently is (see Table 1). Sixty percent of the college women reported that in five years

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they will exercise on at least one day more each week, averaging 3.7 days and that their workouts will be longer and more intense. A 10-year projection of exercise level revealed that 43.5 percent of college women believed they will be exercising more frequently than they are now, again with higher intensity than currently reported. When projecting levels of

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exercise 20 years from now, 21.2 percent of them reported that they will exercise more frequently but for fewer hours and at a lower intensity.

### *Relationship Between Aging, Diet and Exercise*

Compared with inactive young women, college females who exercised regularly were more likely to consider future use of natural strategies to maintain a youthful appearance, such as eating healthfully, staying out of the sun and taking vitamins. More physically active young women were also more satisfied with their physical appearance and less likely to perceive negative consequences of aging on various facets of their lives. Furthermore, inactivity was significantly related to a high drive for thinness, eating disorder symptomatology and depression. College women who reported stronger peer influence to lose weight were also more likely to exercise for longer periods of time and have a greater desire to be thin. However, discussing weight loss or gain with friends was related to dissatisfaction with one's body, despite the positive effects of encouraging exercise.

### *Comparison of College Female Perceptions of Aging to Elderly Adult Reports*

Table 2 (opposite page) summarizes participants' perceptions of body image and aging. College females rated age-related changes in appearance as more important to future body satisfaction than reported by the older women. The college females also reported that aging

would make them much less satisfied with their appearance than reported by the older women. Similarly, college females' perceptions of the negative conse-

quences of aging as they are related to sense of self and personality were much more negative than those experienced by the sample of older women, who reported little to no change in these areas.

College women were overwhelmingly more likely than older women to consider cosmetic surgery to reduce the signs of aging. Younger women also spent significantly more money (almost \$700 a year more) on anti-aging and camouflaging products than the older women, who more frequently reported using natural strategies such as eating a healthy diet (89.8 percent), exercising regularly (77.6 percent) and staying out of the sun (59.2 percent). Finally, college females were significantly more likely to discuss weight loss, weight gain and dieting with their peers than the older sample, which may partly explain the younger women's higher levels of eating disorder symptomatology, drive for thinness and levels of depression.

### **Discussion**

The findings suggest that college females have a variety of negative expectations regarding age-related changes in physical appearance. However, the

young women's bleak picture of aging is, according to our data from older women, quite inaccurate. Whereas college females assume that aging will be accompanied by a host of negative consequences, older women generally did not report experiencing negative effects of aging on body image or other aspects of life. Since the two groups of women are from different generations, their disparate views of aging could be due to a cohort effect. It is impossible to know whether the older women are less concerned with appearance because they now have sources of happiness and satisfaction other than their appearance, or if the importance of body image was emphasized less during their young adult years. Strong sociocultural messages about thinness and attractiveness seem to be much more pervasive today than in past decades. For many young women, the cultural ideal is inconsistent with aging and, because of the strong influence body image has on various areas of psychosocial functioning (3), changes in body image due to aging are a cause for concern.

It is possible that the prevalence of peer dieting and discussion about body size among young women may make the prospect of aging rather threatening. Their shared concerns about weight and shape, coupled with fears of aging, may result in greater popularity of various methods to reverse or conceal signs of aging. Their higher levels of eating disorder symptomatology and consideration of future cosmetic surgery compared with older women may also be a function of appearance-related peer interactions and illustrate the considerable influence of contemporary social pressures to maintain an ideal (i.e., youthful) image.

Exercise may be an important factor in adjustment to aging. Young women who exercise regularly were more likely to anticipate using natural strategies, such as eating healthfully, to maintain their

**Table 2 — College-Age and Older Women's Perceptions of Body Image and Aging**

Question		College women (n=202)		Elderly women (n=49)	
		Mean*	Standard Deviation	Mean*	Standard Deviation
How important are/will the following changes be in determining how you feel about your physical appearance? Scale: 1 (very unimportant) to 6 (very important)	Lines and wrinkles	4.7	1.2	3.8	1.8
	Decreased muscle tone	4.6	1.1	5.0	1.2
	Sagging breasts/chest	4.8	1.2	4.1	1.6
	Varicose veins	4.8	1.1	3.9	1.8
	Hair loss	5.2	1.1	4.7	1.9
How do/will these changes make you feel about your physical appearance? Scale: 1 (much more satisfied) to 5 (much less satisfied)	Unwanted hair	4.4	0.7	3.8	1.0
	Sagging breasts/chest	4.4	0.7	3.9	0.8
	Varicose veins	4.2	0.7	3.6	0.9
	Hair loss	4.5	0.7	3.8	1.1
	Dentures/dental change	4.2	0.8	3.8	1.0
What impact do these age-related changes have on the following general areas of your life? Scale: 1 (very positive) to 5 (very negative)	Social life	3.3	0.8	3.1	0.9
	Self-confidence	3.8	0.9	2.9	1.1
	Spontaneity	3.5	0.7	2.9	1.1
	Mood	3.6	0.8	3.0	1.1
How seriously would you consider the following cosmetic surgical procedures to reduce the physical signs of aging? Scale: 1 (never considered) to 5 (had it done)	Breast lift	2.0	1.1	1.3	0.9
	Stomach tuck	1.9	1.0	1.3	0.8
	Liposuction	2.0	1.2	1.4	0.9
	Varicose vein removal	2.3	1.2	1.3	0.6
	Hair transplant	1.5	0.9	1.1	0.2
How often do/will you use the following products to slow, reverse or camouflage the aging process? Scale: 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always)	Hair coloring	3.7	1.1	2.8	1.8
	Fade/wrinkle creams	3.1	1.2	1.9	1.3
	Makeup	4.1	1.0	3.5	1.6
	Girdles	2.5	1.2	1.9	1.2
	Hair-removal products	3.6	1.1	1.7	1.1
How often do/will you rate your attractiveness by comparing yourself to the following people? Scale: 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always)	Models my own age	3.3	1.1	1.9	1.1
	Friends my own age	3.7	0.9	2.5	1.3
	Relatives (all ages)	2.9	1.7	2.1	1.0
How effective have/will the following strategies be for coping with age-related changes in your appearance? Scale: 1 (not at all effective) to 5 (very effective)	Using humor	3.6	0.7	3.2	1.2
	Exercising	3.8	0.5	3.2	1.0
	Seeking support from others	3.3	0.9	2.4	1.2
	Staying active	3.8	0.5	3.5	0.9

\*All mean differences are statistically significant.

youthful appearance. In addition, physically active young women were more satisfied with their physical appearance and less pessimistic about the consequences of aging. In contrast, inactive young women were more likely to experience

eating disorder symptoms and depression. Given the apparent benefits of physical activity, maintenance of an exercise program may ameliorate some of the distressing aspects of growing older.

Whereas young women appear to

fear the process of aging and its perceived deleterious effects, older women, who may have had similar fears in their youth, reported generally being satisfied with their physical appearance. In fact, levels of satisfaction with appearance

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were virtually identical for college-aged and older women. Perhaps imagining oneself at an older age is more anxiety-provoking than the slow aging process itself. Older women who have experienced these changes over a number of years may have learned to accept the changes in their physical appearance by utilizing a number of effective coping skills and identifying alternative sources of self-esteem. With the graying of America, it is important to further explore the impact of aging and effective ways of coping with this inevitable process. A better understanding of gender-specific as well as universal concerns about aging may facilitate efforts to help the rapidly growing number of older adults accept and adjust to the natural changes of aging in a culture that idealizes youth and devalues the elderly. ☉

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