

# Fashion, the Body, and Age

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## INTRODUCTION

Clothes lie at the interface between the body and its social presentation, one of the ways whereby bodies are made social, given identity and meaning. Dress thus needs to be understood, in Joanne Entwistle's (2000) words, as "situated body practice," in which getting up and dressed is a process of preparing the body for the social world, both an intimate experience of the body and a public presentation of it. When we get dressed we do so within the bounds of a culture and its particular norms. These norms include ones in relation to age.

Within popular culture, and the related medicalized accounts that have come to dominate perception, age is primarily seen as a product of physiology, something rooted in the processes of bodily decline, evidenced in outward signs such as wrinkles, graying hair, and changes in figure and stance. But aging also needs to be understood as a social and cultural construct. As analysts of the political economy school have shown (Arber and Ginn 1991; Estes 1979; Estes and Binney 1989; Phillipson 1998; Phillipson and Walker 1986; Townsend 1986), many of the key features of later years are determined as much by social as physiological processes. Critical cultural gerontologists like Margaret Gulleto (1997, 1999) and Kathleen Woodward (1999, 2006) have extended the critique to show how individuals are aged by culture, exploring the network of meanings and practices within which later life is experienced and understood.

In this chapter I explore the role that dress plays—and has played historically—in the constitution of age. In particular, I look at the idea that the relationship between age and dress is changing and that traditional assumptions have been eroded with the result that dress is no longer age ordered in the way it once was. Have the rise of consumption culture and the democratization of fashion meant that older people are no longer expected to dress in distinctive ways? What role might the body play in this?

### *What Counts as Old?*

The point at which people become “old” varies historically and across cultures, as it does by gender and social class also (Calasanti and Slevin 2006). In current Western society, the entry to old age is conventionally marked by retirement: this is how it is defined in official statistics. But as we shall see, in recent years the boundaries have become more fluid with the destabilization of the normative life course and the wider reconstitution of age. As a result chronological age has increasingly given way to versions rooted in lifestyle. Aging also needs to be understood as specific to distinctive cultural spheres, so that what counts as old or older varies according to the cultural context. In relation to high fashion, aging sets in early, certainly by the late twenties. Fashion is, in general, a youth-oriented cultural field, and these judgments reverberate through it at all levels. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I will largely be addressing late middle age and older, broadly conceived as fifty plus.

### *Gender*

In this chapter I mostly look at the question of age and dress in relation to women. This reflects both the scope of the literature and the wider cultural perception of the field. Fashion and dress have long been culturally constituted as feminized areas, their discourses predominantly embodied in the lives of women. Thus women, in the past and today, are more engaged with fashion: spending more money on clothes and more time shopping, paying more attention to reading about the topic. Preoccupation with dress in men has traditionally been viewed negatively (at least since the period of the great masculine renunciation; Flugel 1930), though this is changing with the current spread of interest in fashion among younger men. It remains the case, however, that older men as a group are largely disengaged from the sphere of fashion. However, they too wear clothes, buy garments in the market, and are subject to many of the cultural pressures that bear on women in relation to age. They have, however, received little attention in the literature, which when it does address age—and that is rare—concentrates almost exclusively on women.

## THE NEGLECT OF AGE AS A SOCIAL CATEGORY

There is a long-established link in dress studies between clothing and social identity, with extensive work exploring the intersections of dress with gender, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality (Davis 1992; Holliday 2001; Khan 1993; Rolley 1993; Tarlo 2010), as well as with distinctive, often transgressive subcultural styles (Polhemus 1994; Wilson 1985). Clothes are indeed, as Christopher Breward (2000) notes, one of the ways in which social difference is made concrete and visible. Such perspectives have, however, rarely been extended to age. Though age is one of the master identities and a source of significant social and cultural differentiation, it has been neglected within sociology and cultural

studies. It is often omitted from debates on intersectionality (Anthias 2001). It remains taken for granted in the same way that gender was until the 1980s: treated as something so obvious, so naturalized in biology, that its social significance is neglected. But how we are perceived, who we socialize with, how we are judged and ordered socially, what deserts are deemed appropriate for us, are all crucially determined by our age or our location within an age categorization. It is indeed a key social division (Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Laws 1995; Laz 1998, 2003). We should not be surprised, therefore, to find it expressed in and through dress.

The neglect of age within fashion studies has been particularly marked. This is partly the result of a general omission within the related field of cultural studies, but it also reflects the specific values of the fashion world. Fashion is strongly—perhaps inherently—youth oriented. It is beautiful, young bodies that designers aspire to dress and that are featured throughout the fashion system (Fine and Leopold 1993). This presents an idealized world in which age does not feature, or where it represents a dereliction, a corruption of the vision, a falling off and failure, something to be excluded and ignored. Aging here takes on the features of Julia Kristeva's (1982) abjection, something to be feared, repelled, cast into darkness. From the perspective of mainstream fashion, age is simply not attractive or sexy. Fashion is indeed closely linked to the erotic, so much so that for some theorists the constant play of eroticism is the engine force of fashion and the key to its meaning and deep appeal. Older people, particularly women, are regarded to be beyond the erotic, and indeed, particularly in the eyes of the young, beyond sex itself.

A more sympathetic approach exists within social anthropology, which has a long tradition of taking clothing and dress seriously (Crane and Bovone 2006; Hansen 2004). This has received further impetus from the material turn in anthropology and sociology, in which clothing and dress are part of the creation of symbolic values and their attribution to material culture. Daniel Miller and others have explored the ways in which material objects, like the physical surroundings of the home, become significant in meaning making, representing aspects of distributed personhood (Guy, Green, and Banim 2001; Miller 1987, 1998; Weber and Mitchell 2004; S. Woodward 2007). Clothes are part of this: indeed, for Miller, getting dressed is an almost Hegelian process of self-actualization. Among these meanings are ones relating to age.

## AGE ORDERING

The clearest way we can observe the links between age, dress, and identity is through the long-established pattern of age ordering. By this I mean the systematic patterning of cultural expression according to an ordered and hierarchically arranged concept of age. It is clearest to see in relation to children, where at least since the late eighteenth century, and often before, children have worn distinctive age-related forms of dress. The degree to which childhood is marked out in this way has varied historically (Marshall 2008). It is associated in particular with the romantic movement and the new cult of childhood

that emerged in the nineteenth century with its emphasis on children as social beings in their own right, expressed through distinctive dress. Daniel Cook (2004) traces this development into the early twentieth century with the emergence of retailing specifically aimed at children, particularly based in department stores. More recently, the trend has been for children's clothes to be less, rather than more, distinctive, with the spread to young girls in particular of adult female styles, as part of a more general extension of consumption culture to this group.

In relation to old age, there has been a similar pattern of structured expectations, expressing norms about what is appropriate—or, more significantly, inappropriate—dress for people as they age. Such patterning is observable historically in manuscripts, portraits, woodcuts, and book illustrations, and it is vividly present in classic pyramidal images of the ages of man or woman, in which dress is used to convey social and bodily change across the life course (Thane 2005). Though always subject to historical specificity, certain features recur in relation to dress and age: more covered-up styles, higher necklines, tighter-drawn linen, and longer skirts, or for men the adoption of the long robe. Colors tend to be darker and more sober, styles less showy. There is a widespread sense—persisting today—that old age is a time for pulling back from overt display. The pressure to tone down, to retreat from being visible, was reported even in Samantha Holland's (2004) study of women who had adopted radical, transgressive styles of dress. Such strictures focus in particular on sexuality. Old women wearing ultrafashionable or sexually explicit dress have long been the mainstay of misogynistic imagery that draws on the *Vanitas* tradition (Tseëlon 1995). In more muted form it is found in the cultural trope of mutton dressed as lamb (Fairhurst 1998). Lastly, the traditional dress of age is often presented as shabby and worn, as well as dull and dark, reflecting the structural association of age with poverty.

These features of age-associated clothing point to the ways in which dress makes manifest deeper ideological structures. As Malcolm Barnard (1996) argues, clothes are ideological, part of the process whereby social groups establish, sustain, and reproduce positions of power, relations of domination and subordination. They contribute to how inequity is made to seem natural, proper, and legitimate. This perception has largely been developed in relation to gender and class, but it applies also to age. Many of the features noted above—the drabness, the self-effacement, the retreat from social claims to fashionability and display—reflect the wider social marginalization of the old. Many older women report becoming invisible (Gibson 2000; Greer 1991; K. Woodward 2006). Such forms of dress thus underwrite the structural exclusion and poverty imposed on many older people, naturalizing at a bodily level processes that are essentially social.

More recently, however, there has been a growing sense that norms are changing; that age-related rules of dress have gone, or are at least fading fast. A number of elements underlie this. The first relates to changes in the clothing system itself, with the decline, over the long historical period, of status-related forms of dress, so that, for example, marital

status in women or professional standing in men are no longer overtly marked in dress as they once were—though of course they are still reflected in subtler ways. The requirement to express age in dress has thus weakened in line with general developments in the dress code.

Significant changes have also occurred in relation to the social position of older people. Demographic change in the twentieth century has reweighted the population toward older groups: between 1901 and 2003 the proportion of the UK population aged fifty and over increased from 15 to 30 percent, and it is projected to rise to 41 percent in 2031 (Tomassini 2005). Increased longevity, rising living standards, and new fluidities in social roles have supported the emergence of the Third Age as a new cultural space (Gilleard and Higgs 2000; Phillipson 1998). A period of post-retirement, free from the constraints of work and, to some degree, family responsibility, it represents a time of leisure, pleasure, and self-development. Peter Öberg and Lars Tornstam (1999, 2001) suggest that later life is best conceptualized as an extended plateau of middle years that ceases only with the irruption of ill health and disability. They argue that modern cultures are marked by a declining salience of age ordering at all stages of life, with adulthood increasingly forming an undifferentiated period between childhood and frail old age. In this reconfiguration of later years, consumption plays a significant role. Many middle-aged and older people have high disposable incomes (though many do not), and this has supported the use of consumption as a means of agency and identity formation in later years, as in younger stages. Within an increasingly individuated culture, consumption also performs an integrative function, acting to integrate people within a common culture of lifestyle. For better-off older people it thus offers a concrete means of integration with the mainstream, helping to undermine the marginalization traditionally associated with age. Clothing can be part of this.

Lastly, in parallel with these developments in relation to older people have been changes in the fashion industry itself, which has undergone major restructuring with the development in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century of fully globalized supply, resulting in massive growth in productive capacity (Aspers 2010; Jones 2006). This has stimulated the active creation of new markets through the extension of the fashion cycle to groups previously excluded from the mainstream, notably children and older people.

### **“MOVING YOUNGER”: THE NEW OLD**

Across the field of fashion and age there is a pervasive language of “moving younger.” There is a sense that older people today are “different” from earlier cohorts. Those currently in their fifties and sixties—sometimes loosely termed the baby boomers—are often presented as a pioneer generation (Gilleard and Higgs 2002, 2007; Phillipson 2007), the cohort that grew up with youth culture in the 1960s and matured with the consumption boom of the 1980s and 1990s. Accustomed to consumption, they see no reason to abandon its pleasures—including those of wearing attractive, fashionable

dress. Furthermore, most older women in this cohort have worked, or are working, and this has given them access to income and opportunities to shop. As a result they represent a generation, it is suggested, who are in some sense “younger” than previous ones—a feature captured in the popular media phrase of “sixty as the new fifty,” or even forty—and they have no interest in adopting “frumpy” age-related styles.

Retailers certainly share this view. As the design manager for George at ASDA, a UK value supermarket, noted in an Economic and Social Research Council study of clothing and age:

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. (Twigg 2013: 130)

The marketing director of Edinburgh Woollen Mill, a UK retailer focused on the older market, similarly commented in the study:

I don't think people who are in their 50s 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. (Twigg 2012a: 1047)

These changes have largely been presented in positive terms, reflecting new social confidence among older people. The freedom to wear stylish mainstream dress is seen as a form of empowerment, of resistance to the traditional culture of marginalization and invisibility. The media in particular have been fascinated by imagery of middle-aged and older women “shopping till they drop,” or refusing to give up their Manolos. These themes are particularly strongly present in magazines or newspapers aimed at—and crucially written by—women in their forties, fifties, and sixties. This defiant consumption-driven vision dominates the popular media account.

These developments are, however, also open to more negative interpretation. Like many cultural phenomena, the spread of fashionability to older women is Janus faced. As the culture extends new opportunities, it also imposes new demands, new requirements—that they be fashionable. Dress can be part of a wider process of governmentality in relation to women's bodies in which they are increasingly subject to disciplinary demands regarding appearance. We are familiar with these pressures in terms of younger women, with widespread regimes of slimming, exercise, and cosmetic surgery through which they are required to discipline and control their bodies (Bordo 1993; Gimlin 2002; Shilling 2005; Wolf 1990). Increasingly these demands are spreading to older women too (Furman 1997; Hurd Clarke 2011). The

requirement to be fashionable, to avoid age-stigmatized clothing, can thus be seen as part of the wider set of Foucauldian techniques of the self, through which the bodies of older people are disciplined, ordered, and made subject to cultural norms, in which successful aging is increasingly interpreted as aging without the appearance of doing so (Katz 1996; K. Woodward 2006). These new versions of “successful” or “positive aging,” however, implicitly act to silence other versions, other ways of being old—of “not bothering,” of “giving up,” of using the invisibility imposed on older women, as Germaine Greer (1991) suggests, as a screen behind which to develop a new life, one freed from the demands of appearance and of the disciplinary practices of normative femininity.

### “MOVING YOUNGER”: CONSUMPTION AS ASPIRATIONAL

There are, however, two other ways in which we can understand the pervasive language of “moving younger.” The first relates to the aspirational nature of consumption. Clothes are part of consumption culture, aspirational goods promoted in terms of a dream of an idealized self. This is the central dynamic that fuels the constant pursuit of goods, and it is of particular significance in the case of clothing, where retailers are selling into a saturated market. Part of that dream is of a younger self. As a result retailers persistently present their goods as aimed at a younger market than is in fact the case, and they certainly try to avoid association with an older one. This produces a dynamic whereby everyone in the field is “moving younger”: using young models to display their clothes, selecting promotional settings that emphasize youthful zest, weeding their ranges to lift the offer visually. A similar dynamic operates in the field of fashion magazines, where the target readership is systematically described as younger than the actual age profile revealed in the marketing data (Twigg 2010, 2012b, 2013). This allows the magazine to perform its classic role of reflecting back to readers a visual world that is an idealized version of the one they inhabit, allowing them to identify at a fantasy level with a self that is younger—just as it is slimmer, smarter, and richer—than the reality (Gough-Yates 2003; Hermes 1995; Winship 1987).

In addressing the gray market, retailers face an essential tension: how to build a brand around a negative identity. As the editor of UK *Vogue*, Alexandra Shulman, commented in the Economic and Social Research Council study:

I think at some level nobody wants to be older. Nobody wants to be fat and nobody wants to be old. You don't want to be poor either. There's lots of things that nobody wants to be, and actually older is just, in general, one of them. So to sort of create a kind of niche whereby if you buy it you're saying, “I am older,” you can kind of see why people don't necessarily want to do that. (Twigg 2013: 126)

Nonetheless, she added, “I'm not convinced that there isn't a way round dealing with it, that we don't quite seem to have got.”

Retailing analysts concur with this, and there is a widespread sense that the older market is badly served. Through the late 1990s and early 2000s older women were repeatedly identified as “frustrated shoppers,” unable to find attractive clothes aimed at them (Mintel 2000). Marketeers are certainly very conscious of the potential of the gray market (Gunter 1998; Key Note 2006; Lavery 1999; Mintel 2006; Moschis 1996; Sawchuk 1995; Verdict 2008). They are aware of the spending power of this group, or at least sections of it. Nick Long (1998) describes the over forty-fives in the United Kingdom as having nearly 80 percent of all financial wealth and being responsible for about 30 percent of consumer spending. Harry Moody and Sanjay Sood (2010) in their account of age branding describe the over fifty-fives in the United States as having twice the discretionary income of younger groups (18–49). Market research reports in the United Kingdom (Key Note 2006) point to the relative affluence of those in their fifties and sixties. But retailers find it difficult to address this market effectively. Part of the problem is that “older people,” as David Metz and Michael Underwood (2005) and others note, are as diverse in their circumstances, values, and lives as younger groups. Though attempts have been made to develop market segmentation based around lifestyle rather than chronological age, these have not proved successful (Easey 2002; Gunter 1998; Hines and Quinn 2007; Lavery 1999; Mintel 2000; Moschis 1996; Otieno, Harrow, and Lea-Greenwood 2005). Attempts to reconstitute the older population in terms of lifestyle are also open to the criticism that they act to hide significant differences rooted in class, income, race, and sexuality. Stephen Katz and Barbara Marshall (2003) note how the discourses of marketing with their emphasis on silver surfers and zoomers (“boomers who zoom”) allow structural differences in the population to disappear into market niches.

Retailers thus face a problem in signaling their relevance to this group, which remains in a vague, undifferentiated state that the companies are reluctant to define. Some used coded terms such as “classic” to indicate the market. Occasionally a brand will use humor, such as Not Your Daughter’s Jeans, to suggest a cut aimed at the older figure. What they all avoid, however, is direct reference to age.

The aspiration of “moving younger” needs to be set in the context of a pervasive culture of ageism, in which looking “ten years younger” (the title of a popular makeover show in the United Kingdom) has become a central cultural ideal. This supports a vast international industry of antiaging, promoted through pills, diets, exercise regimes, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and aesthetic surgery (Gilleard and Higgs 2000; Hurd Clarke 2011). Clothing and dress can be part of this, and one of the persistent themes of magazine makeovers is how to achieve this younger look. The process of wearing “younger” clothes to look younger, however, has its limits. Though youthful and fashionable dress can create a more youthful style, particularly where it reflects body styles that are more casual and relaxed in a “modern” way, extremely youthful styles act only to point up the aging body that wears them. Styles that are frilly, girly, pretty, or overtly sexy are all marked by this quality of emphasizing age rather than diluting it. They each point

to a particular version of embodied femininity that centers on youthful sexuality. As Toni Calasanti and Kathleen Slevin (2006) have argued, the dominant cultural concept of femininity is itself youthful. Youth here becomes part of the unmarked category, the dominant neutral that is the assumed state, the standard against which other versions of femininity are judged as lacking.

### “MOVING YOUNGER”: AGE AS STYLE DIFFUSION

There is, however, a third, and different, way in which we can understand the language of “moving younger,” and this is in terms of the processes of fashion themselves, and in particular the dynamics of style diffusion. From classic sociological accounts, starting with the works of Thorstein Veblen ([1899] 1953) and Georg Simmel ([1904] 1971), we are familiar with fashion as a tool of class competition, part of a dynamic of competitive emulation and display in which styles are taken up and abandoned by elites as they are transferred down the social hierarchy. Elites display their distinction through repeatedly marking themselves off from lower orders (Bourdieu 1984). More recently, the dominance of class in the dynamic of fashion has been questioned, with the rise of a plurally based fashion system, in which alternative sources such as street fashions, music styles, and youth cults are increasingly influential (Davis 1992; Entwistle 2000; Polhemus 1994). As part of this shift, Diane Crane argues, youth has replaced class as the engine of fashion. With the wider democratization of fashion, she argues, class is no longer the key driver. Although the analysis centers on youth, her insight is also significant for age:

Instead of the upper class seeking to differentiate itself from other social classes, the young seek to differentiate themselves from the middle aged and the elderly. As trends diffuse to older age groups, younger age groups adopt new styles. (2000: 198)

By this interpretation, age ordering has not gone. It is still significant; it is just that it has taken on a new form. Rather than simply denoting social position as in the past, it is now caught up in the dynamic of fashion itself. What we are observing, therefore, is not that the dress of older people is moving younger but that styles are diffusing older, as they pass from the center of fashionability in the youth market to the periphery in the older one. It is this that underlies the sense that ultrafashionable styles look “odd,” “unsuitable,” “ridiculous,” or “sad” on older people. The sharpness of their fashionability has to be blunted before they can be adopted by older wearers. Thus in the 1980s leggings initially emerged on the fashion scene promoted by Vivienne Westwood, carrying a sense of shock and sexual frisson, then moved into the youthful mainstream, and from there on to middle-aged housewives on peripheral housing estates, thus making the diffusional journey in terms of both age and class (until, of course, they were revived

again in the youthful market in the mid-2000s). There is a parallel here with James Laver's (1937: 40) celebrated account of the fashion cycle, in which styles are indecent ten years before their time, daring one year before, chic in their time, dowdy three years later, hideous twenty years after, amusing thirty years after, romantic a hundred years later, and beautiful in a hundred and fifty years; however, since the 1930s, the cycle has speeded up. Part of the diffusion to the status of dowdiness and out-of-dateness relates to age. Anthony Freitas and colleagues (1997), for example, in their study of college-aged young people's views found that they associated styles for older people with being out-of-date and were keen to mark themselves off from them.

Sometimes the process of style diffusion rests on a cohort effect, with the meaning of styles altering with the aging of the cohort that wears them. For example, in the 1950s tweed sports jackets in the United Kingdom were worn by young men—undergraduates or young teachers—and were associated with a youthful, easygoing approach. Although in photographs today they appear conservative, that was not their meaning in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1980s such jackets—classically in gray herringbone—become standard wear for conservative, middle-aged male academics, representing sober, sensible garb that stopped short of the formality of a suit. By the early twenty-first century, the tweed jacket and tie has gone from the world of work and is to be found in older people's clubs and retirement homes, worn by men in their seventies and eighties. A parallel pattern occurs in relation to pleated skirts for women. Young and fresh in the 1950s and 1960s, they have become increasingly age coded, until in the early 2000s they are emblems of age; retailers like Jaeger in the United Kingdom refuse to stock them because they "age the range" (though in the ever restless nature of a fashion, they are enjoying a revival at the younger end; Twigg 2013).

### AGING AND THE BODY: ADJUSTING THE CUT

So far we have—rightly—treated clothing and age as cultural phenomena. But we need to recognize the ways in which the dress styles in relation to age also reflect the ways in which the body alters. 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, assisting the wearer to appear nearer the fashionable norm—in the case of older women, nearer the body of a slim young woman. Designers sometimes add details that adjust or "help" with such presentation; for example, shoulder pads in a blouse or jersey can restore the body nearer the youthful norm, allowing the garment to hang better. Clothes have always performed this function, enabling individual bodies with their idiosyncrasies to be presented publicly in a form nearer the current norm, and these reflect systematic ideals about the body. The history of English tailoring for men, as it developed from the end of the eighteenth century in the context of elite, wool-based

clothing, is a testimony to these processes whereby an idealized masculine figure is produced through the judicious use of tailoring, cut, and padding.

Adjusting the cut to make it fit better can, however, have the effect of “aging” the garment, writing into its very structure information about the sort of body that is meant to inhabit it. This is most clearly visible in ranges aimed at distinctly older women, where the cut is markedly different, with lower bust seams and undefined waists. Certain features such as elasticized waists come to be associated with age, and retailers aiming at a less age-identified look try to avoid these, substituting, for example, drawstrings. Retailers can also adjust the cut in the degree to which it is close to the body, with ranges aimed at those in their fifties and sixties more closely shaped than those aimed at people in their seventies and eighties. Retailers sometimes also try to finesse the issue by featuring styles that are looser and softer and that draw on Japanese influences. Some of the most successful and “modern”-looking ranges for the older market deploy this approach (Twigg 2011).

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Adjusting the cut is also often 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. Avoiding such exposure can present difficulties for designers, for example, when fashion dictates sleeveless dresses, so that adding sleeves detracts from fashionability, aging the garment and, by implication, the wearer. Here, of course, although the features of the body they are designing to are rooted in physiological aging, 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 Emmanuelle 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 that are internalized by the women themselves and by those designing for them. Particularly sensitive are aspects of the body that express sexuality. Here women’s bodies, as we have noted, are judged against a cultural norm that equates sexuality with youthfulness and presents older bodies as inadequate, flawed, or failed and best kept covered up.

A third way in which cut is adjusted for the aging body concerns sizing. As people age, they tend to put on weight. One of the marked features of ranges aimed at older customers is that they have a “generous” cut, so much so indeed that one of the ways one can recognize such ranges is through sizing. Though all UK manufacturers use standard schemes such as 10, 12, and 14, how they operationalize these varies: a size 12 in a youth shop is very different from one in a shop oriented to the over fifties. This is partly in order to flatter and reassure older customers, but it also reflects changes in the

shape of the body. Manufacturers tend to treat sizing data as commercially confidential, reflecting their detailed knowledge of their market (Apeagei 2010). More systematic data have, however, recently become available through the Size UK study that scanned 11,000 members of the UK population.<sup>1</sup> This established a distinctive “mature” figure type that is available for manufacturers to use as a basis for sizing.

As a result of these changes in the body, slimming is often pursued as an antiaging technique. Extreme slimness means having a body more like that of a young woman, at least of a young fashion model, with the ultraslim androgynous figure favored by the industry. In particular, it means not having the problematic aspects of the female body once it has aged, when the bust has enlarged and lowered, the hips spread, and flesh in general lost its tone. Having little or no flesh thus enables ultraslim older women to fit into fashionable dress in a way that is denied to most women as they age. Paradoxically, therefore, remaining “youthful” rests on avoiding a very feminine figure earlier in life.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, dress is closely implicated in the expression of identity, one of the means whereby this is made concrete and visible. Though dress studies have explored these links in relation to classic dimensions such as gender, class, and sexuality, it has neglected age, despite its cultural significance. As we have noted, age ordering is a long-established feature of Western dress. More recently, however, claims have been made for its demise. There is certainly evidence to support a sense that its rigor has lessened. This has occurred in conjunction with wider changes in the social location of older people, indeed with a general dissolution of the boundaries that once defined old age as a distinctive period. Cultural forms such as consumption have played a part in this—certainly for the better-off. But as we noted, there are other ways in which we can understand the persistent sense that older people are “moving younger” in their dress choices. One of these relates to the aspirational nature of consumption and of the related cultural fields of the media and advertising, which project dreams in which people’s lives are reflected back to them in improved and aspirational forms. In a culture saturated with fear of aging, this means showing them as younger. “Moving younger” can also be understood in terms of changes in the fashion system itself, with the shift in the dynamic of fashion diffusion away from class toward age. Age ordering has taken on a new form. Rather than simply denoting social position as in the past, it is now caught up in the dynamic of fashion itself. It is not that the dress of older people is moving younger but that styles are diffusing older.

As we have noted, most of the academic work addressing fashion has omitted age from its view, and most of the work on age has similarly ignored these areas of consumption, performance, and identity. Recently, welcome developments have attempted to bridge this gap in analysis. Debates around appearance, the commodification of

antiaging, and the tensions of age denial and age resistance have emerged as part of the wider cultural turn in gerontology. In a parallel way, dress studies, particularly under the influence of anthropological and sociological approaches, have begun to extend their remit to the population as a whole and to the everyday nature of clothing as situated body practice (Entwistle 2000). Further work linking clothing and age would allow these developments to come to fuller fruition.

### NOTE

1. "SizeUK—Results from the UK National Sizing Survey 2012," University of the Arts London, <http://www.fashion.arts.ac.uk/research/projects-collaborations/archive/size-uk/> (accessed May 7, 2013).

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AQ2 Change to “Aging”? Please verify.  
AQ3 Change to “Aging”? Please verify.  
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