

## CONSIDERING YOUR AGE: A STUDY OF HOW WOMEN ABOVE THE AGE OF SIXTY EXPRESS THEMSELVES THROUGH FASHION

Divya N

“Considering your age, you dress well and still look beautiful!”

This is the number one compliment my mother has been receiving ever since she turned 60, three years ago. Disenchanted by our obsession with reading youth as beauty, I vowed to examine the nuances of the relationship that exists between fashion and age. What motivates a fashionable senior woman to dress the way she does? How does society regard a well-dressed senior woman? Is fashion only for the young? Or does it have a place for the elderly?

Last year as I found my first grey hair strand, I realised that I too was ageing. As the importance of a conversation on ageing dawned on me, I reached out to seven ordinary, well-dressed women between the ages of 61 and 74 seeking understanding. Hailing from varying geographical locations, financial and educational backgrounds, these women were willing to spend money to look and feel good. I chose women who are not encompassed within conventional fashion studies, but still wear stylish clothes and make choices with regard to them.<sup>1</sup> A series of semi-structured interviews backed by secondary research elicited information about style influences, consumption patterns, ideals imposed by the society, cohort effect, zeitgeist, and the expectation these women have from brands.

### THE FASHIONABLE SENIOR WOMAN

According to Magdalena Kondej of Euromonitor, over-65s makes up over 9 percent of the world's population. Though media often portrays ageing in a negative light, 60-plus women are fitter and more energetic than ever.<sup>2</sup> They are no longer satisfied by just living out their lives by performing traditional, age-appropriate roles. They are not sitting in rocking chairs waiting for the end,<sup>3</sup> they want to live life to the fullest, as is the spirit of the times. In a telephone conversation with the author, Judith Boyd (74, ex-nurse and hat-store owner from Denver, Colorado, USA) expressed her wish to travel, explore new relationships and strengthen existing ones. Nina Fletcher (66, a polymer clay artist from the UK) believes in enriching her life by learning new skills. “I go out often with friends and enjoy dressing up for it,” she says in an email.

Senior women are self-aware, having experienced various ups and downs in life. They are mindful of their personalities, their likes and dislikes, and are not interested in compromising on their happiness. They embrace their flaws and acknowledge their issues while trying to be an exquisite version of themselves. A few of them feel the same as they did in their twenties, while others are confident now more than ever.<sup>4</sup> Robin Showstack (61, jewellery-maker and ex-hospital clerk from Belmont, Massachusetts) does not associate with the word ‘elderly’ and prefers to be called ‘mature’ or ‘senior’ instead. These third-agers no longer consider themselves a grey market, but a golden market.<sup>5</sup>

## CULTURAL CONSTITUTION OF AGE WITH REGARD TO FASHION

In her book *Fashion and Age*, Julia Twigg (2013) discusses how, throughout history, certain forms and styles of dress have been deemed appropriate – or more significantly, inappropriate – for people as they age. Older women, in particular, have been subject to social pressure to tone down; to adopt self-effacing, covered-up styles.<sup>6</sup> Time and again experts have argued over whether a woman should “dress up” for herself or to elicit a reaction from someone else. Adding age to the mix complicates the matter; because of the further interrogation of what is the expected reaction and who is it being elicited from.<sup>7</sup> In a personal discussion with me, Viji Hariharan (63, homemaker from Chennai, India) said: “My children see me only as their mother and experience angst when I try something new. They forget that I am my own person too.” Invariably, fashion comes under scrutiny due to its inescapable linkage with a woman’s sexuality. While a teen considers wearing a bralette to be cool, a mature woman considers wearing it shameful. This makes me question if there is an age limit or a ceiling up to which a woman can showcase her sexuality – and beyond which it is prohibited.

On the other hand, I understand that with age comes the opportunity to dress with great sophistication.<sup>8</sup> In Hariharan’s opinion, the elderly must dress elegantly and modestly according to their age. However, she is quick to point out that being modest does not translate to being overly conservative. Apart from Indian wear, her wardrobe includes Western wear such as pants, tops, T-shirts and jeans. However, she draws the line at skirts and dresses, because these are items of clothing that are typically associated with adolescent girls in India. In a personal interview, Jayanthi Mukundan (62, homemaker from Chennai, India) insists that seniors should wear whatever that suits their body type. Nonetheless, her conditioning stops her from looking at senior women as sexual beings.

Growing up in a culture that encourages even younger women to feel ‘shame’ when showcasing their bodies, I wonder if the relationship between age, fashion and sexuality is addressed differently by different cultures. As Hariharan explained: “Most Indian women lose their right to dress the way they want after marriage. Their appearance, particularly clothing, is defined by how their husband or in-laws want them to look. I regard myself fortunate that my husband supports my fashion escapades, [but] many do not even get a chance to explore themselves, even in their youth.”

Showstack, however, is devastated when age-appropriate dressing is suggested. She points to designers and icons who “dress young” like Betsy Johnson, Diane von Furstenberg and Anna Wintour, asserting that fashion has no age boundaries. In an eloquent email interview with me, Josephine Lalwan (66, former PR manager and blogger on “Chicatanyage” from St. Tropez, France) describes the need to adapt trends to suit one’s own body. Boyd and Fletcher too believe that everyone, regardless of age, should express themselves as they wish, in spite of the rampant ageism that is prevalent in society.

## SENIOR FASHION ICONS – SHAPING IDENTITY IN LATER LIFE

A notable increase in senior fashion models in the Western world occurred in 2012. Older women were portrayed as inspirational figures, vibrant and empowering in their own right. Lanvin featured the then 62-year-old Tziporah Salamon and the 82-year-old Jacquie Murdock in their Fall 2012 campaign. Photographer Marsha shot Jacky O’Shaughnessy as the brand ambassador for American Apparel’s Advanced Basics line, while Juergen Teller photographed 60-year-old musician Leslie Winer for Vivienne Westwood’s 2013/14 campaign.<sup>9</sup> As Dolce & Gabbana made their global audience oo and aah over their advertisements by casting a trio of adorable grandmothers in their spring 2015 campaign, at 62 model Marie Helvin stunned the world with her fit and well-toned body during a lingerie shoot for JD Williams’ Fall 2015 50 + collection.<sup>10</sup> Iris Apfel, 95, a senior fashion icon with her “more is more – mad fashion ideology,” established the trend of seniors wearing multiple statement jewellery pieces and eclectic



Figure 1. Fashionable senior women captured in a candid moment. Photographer: Divya N.

clothes.<sup>11</sup> This trend stimulated senior style bloggers, Instagramers and influencers to showcase eclectic senior fashion. Ari Seth Cohen's website "Advanced Style" is acclaimed for encouraging women to be stylish, creative and vital at any age. "We're working to reclaim the word 'old,'" he says. "People are ashamed of that word; they don't want it to be used. There's a huge culture of fear around aging and a whole world of anti-aging. It makes it difficult to fight."<sup>12</sup>

In India, there are very few senior fashion icons, except for actresses like Hema Malini and Jaya Bachchan and dancers like Dr Anitha Ratnam. Even when glamorously made up, they are portrayed as modest and elegant in advertisements, emphasising their age-appropriate looks. Elderly women in Indian TV serials are either shown wearing garish makeup and jewellery or drab, understated attire, pigeonholing them as regressive stereotypes.<sup>13</sup> Why does this disparity occur? Is the West more appreciative of a mature woman than the East?

"We are instructed to dress and behave in a specific way early on in our life; a woman from a good family must constantly appear respectable, more so as she grows older," says Vijaya Narasimhan (63, homemaker from Chennai, India) in a personal interview. While she explores eclectic jewellery, trendy prints and vivid colours, she chooses to be swathed modestly in sarees. "There is a definitive ambiguity in this clothing that helps blend in with the society," she feels. All things considered, Mukundan too believes in maintaining decorum with concealing silhouettes at her age. Unusual colours, attractive fabrics, prints and one-of-a-kind jewellery items transition her look from fading to fabulous.

## FASHION AND THE AGEING BODY

We live in a world of fashion dichotomy, where designers showcase their expensive collections on teenagers or and twenty-something models when their real customers are much older. Design students, too, often create collections for the 18-21 age group, citing the experimental nature of this segment. They consider anyone above 40 to be old

and boring. To rectify this bias, in 2016 JD Williams launched a "Fifty plus fashion week," where fashion students designed collections specifically for senior women. Models aged between 50 and 87 walked the ramp.<sup>14</sup> Sadly, this event has failed to improve age diversity in succeeding ramp shows at fashion weeks. During the 2017 London Fashion Week, five senior models including Jilly Johnson (63) and Janie Felstead (65), led by JD Williams, held a demonstration calling for the wider use of older models at runway shows.<sup>15</sup>

Fashion icons, however, represent only a tiny fraction of women over a certain age. While a few real women consider them as their inspiration to look good and stay fit, a majority of senior women are skeptical about their looks. According to a YouGov study carried out in 2016, over half of all British women over 50 did not feel confident about their bodies. In addition, they felt that they were ignored and unrepresented in TV, magazines and the fashion industry. They thought that high-street brands encourage women to dress younger than they are instead of catering to their needs.<sup>16</sup> The effects of ageing, such as greying thin hair, flabby arms and torso, sagging breasts and teeth loss, forces them to shy away from contemporary styling that makes the body its focus.<sup>17</sup> "My peers wear leggings and form-fitted clothing, but I am uncomfortable in them," point out Hariharan, who alters readymade X-Large clothing for comfort. The popular media treats ageing as negative, and the marketing of new products and services in the skincare, cosmetics and hairdressing sectors has also propagated the anti-ageing phenomenon.<sup>18</sup>

However, the desire to appear fashionable at all times motivates senior women to consume a nutritious diet, stay fit and groom themselves well, aiding their physical and emotional well-being in the process. To paraphrase Ashton Applewhite (2016), author of *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism*, ageing and beauty can and do co-exist – ageing doesn't always have to be about depression or death.<sup>19</sup>

## SENIOR FASHION STYLE INSPIRATION

"Growing up, the fashion and lifestyle magazines of the 1960s and 1970s were major influences," according to the women I interviewed. Driven by peer pressure, they have undeniably wavered through the years, only to find themselves longing to stand apart from their peers with their unique styling. Boyd's choice of looks is governed by her exposure to world culture through her travels. To embellish her hats, she draws inspiration from nature and art. For Showstack, the jewellery designer, the materials and colours she uses in her jewellery impact her personal style. Unconventional components like glass-eye beads and beetle wings have become a part of her style due to their uniqueness.

All seven women interviewed reject TV shows and cinema as a style influence, put off by the confirming (even regressive) images of elders portrayed. This is quite surprising, given that the majority of the day-time TV viewing audience are seniors. They are nevertheless influenced by advertisements – on TV and in email newsletters – which are gradually, as they say, becoming progressive in using older models.

## THE SHOPPING PATTERNS OF INTERVIEWEES

### Apparel – price, uniqueness and quality

Financial and social status contributes to where, what and how a senior woman shops. Hariharan, Showstack and Boyd all favour affordability and variety over quality. They prefer to shop at street markets and thrift stores or buy directly from local artisans rather than investing in heirlooms pieces or branded items. The products must work for the 'here and now.' "There is beauty and magic in styles from every era," says Boyd, who is a fan of recycling clothes from estate sales, "especially since they focus on quality materials and intricate details." Mukundan, Fletcher and Lalwan, on the other hand, vote for style and quality over price as a reflection of both their personal style and social status.



Figure 2. Dressed to kill: marrying conformity with eclectic style. Photographer: Divya N.

## Accessories and jewellery

As women grow older, their emphasis is on comfort rather than just style. Except for Lalwan and Boyd, the interviewees chose shoes based on comfort. Soft materials, orthopedic supports and footwear with a good grip are preferred. On the other hand, Boyd and Lalwan experiment with heels and boots that match their clothing. "Accessories are everything. They are the soul of an ensemble. I seldom leave the house without a hat," claims Boyd. Fletcher creates matching polymer clay jewellery to wear with every top of hers. Lalwan, through her blog "Chicatanyage," helps women to style simple ensembles with classic jewellery. Mukundan, Narasimhan and Hariharan reminisce about the days their ears supported large dangling earrings. But at the mention of handmade necklaces with statement pendants, their eyes light up. "The pieces do not necessarily have to match," they say, "but simply complement the outfit."

## SENIORS AND FASHION BRANDS

What do women over a certain age want from brands?

Fashionable seniors might say they wear what they like and what they feel comfortable in. What does this mean for brands and designers? In order to tap into this market, brands must focus on three areas: sizing, styling and senior-centric communication.

Elderly women's bodies can develop drooping shoulders, sagging breasts and wide hips and thighs, which make them uncomfortable in standard-size clothing that is meant for young women with firm bodies. Alteration of extra-large clothing, wearing loose, shapeless clothes, and total customisation are the only available options. Even after spending a lot of time, money and energy, the results are never quite satisfactory and hardly ever fashionable, according to respondents. Thus, age and shape related sizing (as with kidswear) or in-store fitting could be considered for the elderly.

Senior style is in its nascent stages, particularly in India where there are only a handful of individual designers catering to this segment. As Boyd claims, even in the US only a few affordable retail brands are catering to seniors. "I want to be a fabulously dressed senior; I don't want to pretend that I am younger," said Hariharan, expressing disappointment over the fact that Indian brands rarely design stylised Western wear for older Indian women. Casting aside stereotypes associated with colours like pink or gray, Lalwan feels that brands should create designs that are sophisticated and classy without making them boring. However, not every senior woman is looking for mature designs. Showstack is vehemently against age-specific fashion. "No one wants to look older," she declares. "I want to dress 'young,' as I am young at heart."

Fine jewellery brands often use senior models to establish values of quality and trust. Even the costume jewellery sector is more mindful and responsive to the needs of seniors than apparel brands, offering high value via customisation. Using older models for advertising campaigns would create a stronger connection with third-agers. Lalwan and Mukundan suggest that brands could design their online stores and apps to be senior-friendly. Features like 'try at home,' provided by online jewellery stores like Caratlane and Bluestone in India, or 'cash on delivery' (COD), which is standard practice in restaurants, supermarkets or pharmaceutical stores, would enable them to shop without leaning on youngsters in their family for help.

With the growth of the ecommerce sector in India, there has been a mushrooming of businesses that scam their buyers by displaying catalogue images of fashion products on their social media channels or websites, but sell low-quality knock-offs of the same items. This makes senior women (more than their younger counterparts) wary of online shopping. While big online players like Myntra, Jabong and Flipkart offer COD, the money still has to be paid before unboxing the product. By offering trials at home before payment, websites and brands could drastically reduce the paperwork involved in returns and exchanges and create better customer relationships in the process.

## LEARNING FROM OTHER SECTORS

In sectors like health and finance, the elderly have been a traditional market, with special products to focus on their needs. With world trip packages for retired couples, pilgrimage trips and women-only trails, the travel sector too has been focusing on the senior segment. The cosmetics industry, too, despite its emphasis on youthfulness, has been making great strides in skincare, haircare and makeup products for seniors. Real estate is also gearing up, with senior-living communities and serviced apartments. Overall, the focus is on freedom for seniors to live life on their own terms. The fashion industry could benefit immensely from building a comparable strategy, without dismissing ageing as a fad.

## CONCLUSION

As women age, the relationship with their bodies change and fashion must be fluid enough to transform accordingly. Senior women, much like their junior counterparts, seek beautiful, inspirational fashion imagery in the age, shape and size that they can relate to. The challenge for the retail fashion industry is to recognise and cater to the growing market segment of 60-plus women. The fashion business is slowly but surely undergoing a metamorphosis of sorts, with young designers and startup brands creating merchandise for women over a certain age. Bigger brands, too, would be wise to communicate with seniors about what they want and need: which seems to be to live life to its fullest and leave behind a fashionable legacy.

**Divya N** is a jewellery-maker, fashion designer, design educator and mixed-media artist. She works as assistant professor in the department of Fashion Communication at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Chennai, India. She blogs about culture and jewellery at [www.jewelsofsayuri.com](http://www.jewelsofsayuri.com).

- 1 Julia Twigg, "Clothing, Identity and the Embodiment of Age," in *Ageing Identity: A Dialogue with Postmodernism*, eds Jason Powell and Tony Gilbert (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2009), 93-104.
- 2 Hayley Phelan, "Why the Over-65 Crowd is Conquering Fashion," 31 July 2012, <https://fashionista.com/2012/07/why-the-over-65-crowd-is-conquering-fashion>.
- 3 Mike Walter, *Ageing Stylishly at any Age with Advanced Style*, 31 Jan. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXCUleNZDc4>. Interview with Ilona Royce Smithkin and Ari Cohen, CGTN America.
- 4 Ari Cohen, *Advanced Style*, dir: L Plioplyte (USA, 2014). (DVD)
- 5 Alan Mitchell, "UK: Why Grey Means Gold," 31 August 2010, <http://www.managementtoday.co.uk/uk-why-grey-means-gold/article/410625>.
- 6 Julia Twigg, *Fashion and Age* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- 7 Noelle Sciacca, "'Age-appropriate' Fashion is a Step Backward for Women's Rights," 12 Sept. 2015, <http://mashable.com/2015/09/11/age-discrimination-fashion/#sZqoaC8iRPqn>.
- 8 Jennifer Alfano, "Dressing Your Age," 25 April 2013, <http://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/trends/a968/how-to-dress-your-age-0513/>.
- 9 Anne Karpf, "Older models: The Women in their 60s, 70s and 80s Who are Shaking up Fashion," *The Guardian*, 22 Feb. 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2014/feb/22/older-models-in-fashion>.
- 10 Rosy Cherrington, "62-Year-Old Supermodel Marie Helvin Models New JD Williams Over Fifties Lingerie Range and Looks Stunning," *HuffPost UK*, 22 June 2015, <http://huff.to/2mH2ZNU>.

- 11 Booth Moore, "Iris Apfel Searches Way We Wore for Next 'Totally Mad' Fashion Find," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/fashion/la-ig-iris-afpel-20150503-story.html>.
- 12 Bethany Biron, "Reclaiming the Word 'Old': How Fashion is Fighting Ageism," 21 April 2017, <https://digiday.com/marketing/reclaiming-word-old-fashion-fighting-ageism/>.
- 13 Sharika Nair, "Why are the Serials Aimed at India's Female TV Audience so Regressive?" 23 July 2016, <https://yourstory.com/2016/07/tv-serials-female-regressive/>.
- 14 Melanie Rickey, "The First 50+ Fashion Week: A Catwalk Show Designed for Stylish Women Who Don't Want to be Seen as 'Invisible,'" *The Telegraph*, 18 Feb. 2016, <http://bit.ly/24dR8bh>.
- 15 Ceri Wheeldon, "Fashion Has no Age Limit: Older Models Protest at London Fashion Week," *Fab after Fifty*, <http://www.fabafterfifty.co.uk/2017/02/17/fashion-has-no-age-limit-older-models-protest-at-london-fashion-week/>. (n.d.)
- 16 Saffron Alexander, "Women in Their 50s Feel Less Confident about Their Bodies Than Any Other Age Group," *The Telegraph*, 17 Feb. 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/goodlife/living/women-in-their-50s-feel-less-confident-about-their-bodies-than-a/>.
- 17 Ingun Grimstad Klepp and Ardis Storm-Mathisen, "Reading Fashion as Age: Teenage Girls' and Grown Women's Accounts of Clothing as Body and Social Status," *Fashion Theory*, 9:3 (2005), 323-42.
- 18 Julia Twigg and Shinobu Majima, "Consumption and the Constitution of Age: Expenditure Patterns on Clothing, Hair and Cosmetics among Post-war 'Baby Boomers,'" *Journal of Ageing Studies*, 30 (2014), 23-32.
- 19 Ashton Applewhite, *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism* (Waterville, Maine: Thorndike Press, 2016).