



# Bio-power, medical gaze and negotiation: Narrative experiences of anti-aging practices among Thai women



Patcharee Niamsri <sup>a, b, \*</sup>, Pimpawun Boonmongkon <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Society and Health, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom 73170, Thailand

<sup>b</sup> Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Public Health, Tivanond Road, Nonthaburi 11000, Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aimed to investigate anti-aging practices among Thai women and was conducted using an ethnographic approach. More specifically, the research methods included narrative interviews of participants, in-depth interviews with key informants, participant observation, and document analysis. Triangulation through multiple research data sources and methods was used for data validation purposes. Foucault's theory of bio-power inspired the inquiry and analytical process. The key findings from this study were: (1) the senses of body-self were both positive and negative, including media of happiness and good-spirit, inferiority complexes and worries, changes of the blood and circulatory system, unwanted/undesirable appearance, and reduction in passion and sexual attractiveness; (2) the anti-aging praxis of women involves dominant medical discourse operating a series of diverse knowledge practices. Those have become a truth regime embodied into the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of women. The discourse practices of anti-aging were health, beauty, and lifestyle choices. However, women have fluidity of self as an agency to negotiate with those discourse practices fixed to life contexts. This study revealed the subjective experiences of aging bodies as a sense of body-self and diversity of anti-aging practices reproduce discourse practices to regulate women bodies as bio-power and to increase awareness of narrative experiences of women attempting to understand the agency of women in multiple anti-aging practices in various contexts.

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## Introduction

Western biomedicine has created anti-aging technology, which contributes to the advancement of knowledge that has evolved into anti-aging medicine. The aging body of women is believed to be in decline, deficient, and deviant from the body of the ideal woman, both in internal and external dimensional images, and inconsistent with the standard features on the body of a young girl. Youthfulness has become the norm of medical discourses, which has

generated a corpus of knowledge about the management of the body and aging (Mykytyn, 2010). In addition, the socio-cultural construction of femininity considers value based on physical attractiveness and youth. Therefore, aging moves women away from these cultural ideas (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2003). Information on the popular culture of products and services against aging through marketing and advertising channels, such as food supplementary products and cosmetics, also classifies aging body features compared to a youthful body. Accordingly, an aging body is not desirable. Most women in the world feel threatened and are pulled into the cycle of consumption of anti-aging goods and services which takes some advantage from effeminacy. Several studies, Chan, Stampfer, Giovannucci,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [niamsripat@gmail.com](mailto:niamsripat@gmail.com) (P. Niamsri).

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Gann, Ma, & Wilkinson (as cited in Mehlman, Binstock, Juengst, Ponsaran, & Whitehouse, 2004) reveal that women using anti-aging medical technology, goods and services experienced both physically and mentally positive and negative effects, including the risks of physical harm and inefficient treatment as well as economic loss.

However, there is little research on women's narrative experiences on the practices of anti-aging body management in Thailand. Therefore, the researcher saw the issue of anti-aging as very challenging to investigate and looked for answers with an aim to understanding women in the context of the Thai society. The objectives of this research were to investigate the subjective experiences of aging bodies as senses of body-self and the anti-aging practices of women in Thai society.

### *Discursive Practices*

#### *Aging Body*

According to Foucault, the body is viewed not only as the receiver of discourses, but also as the social construction of discourses (Wiersma, 2007). Biomedicine uses the basis of a biological paradigm, to view the body. Therefore, the aging body, from the viewpoint of the biomedical paradigm, is a body of deterioration or defect. For this reason, senility and aging are considered “deficient”, “incompetent”, or “deteriorating”. Biomedicine has made senility a process that causes biomedicalization. The body in marketing and advertising is a body that does not grow old. Anti-aging has been defined diversely, which determines the types of strategies and differences between anti-aging efforts. This includes slowing down aging, stopping aging, and reversing and maintaining the youthfulness process. Other definitions stress having a longer life as an example of anti-aging in the movement of the society (Binstock, 2004, p. 292). The medical institutions and the institutes of marketing and advertising of products and services have created a corpus of knowledge and practices on the aging body to be a body tied to both health and beauty.

#### *Bio-power*

Foucault's concept of bio-power, or power over life and death is that the technique uses power to manage the body and to make individuals follow discipline.

#### *Medical Gaze*

Under Foucault's notion, medical gaze considers the human as a docile body. The body is viewed as a mechanism in which problems can be fixed.

### **Research Methodology**

This research study involved a qualitative research design. The research participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: females aged between 35 and 59 years old, middle class, having active anti-aging body management, and consenting to giving information. The research participants were recruited from specific areas using the snowball technique—a public youth center, medical service areas, and product and service consumer areas. The research method included narrative

interviews with nine middle-aged women using active anti-aging body management, in-depth interviews with key informants (two medical professionals, two yoga instructors, two owners of goods and services, and one owner of a beauty salon), participant observations in one public youth center, three anti-aging products and services marketing and advertising areas, and documentary analysis. The participant observations took place in the field over the 10 months from August 2012 to May 2013. The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Review Board at Mahidol University. For confidentiality, pseudonyms were applied to all research participants and key informants. Informed consent under the ethical operations of the study was conducted with all the research participants and key informants. Data were analyzed using narrative analysis and thematic content analysis. Reflections disclosing the experiences among the researcher and research participants were included as “intersubjectivity.”

### **Research Findings**

The narrative interviews with the nine research participants who shared subjective experiences about their senses of body-self occurring during the transition stage, covered a wide variety of aspects as follows:

#### *Senses of Body-self: Positive Perception*

Although the women were getting older, they had a good sense of their internal and external bodies. They perceived a youthful external body are as a medium connected to good internal emotion and mind.

#### **Senses of body-self as the medium of happiness and good spirit**

Some women mentioned that they did not feel aging internally and externally and that their bodies were not older and had not changed much from what they were at a young age. Even outer clothes had not changed according to age. They thought they were usually in a good mood, full of fun, and cheerful. Some women said that they did not feel any changes and they were happy and not stressed, with a good mood from inside, which caused them to not look old.

*“I am satisfied with myself that I look good and am not very old. I have played sports until now when I am 57–58. Changes called “gold age” did not happen at all. I am myself, cheerful and fresh.”*

(Meaw, a research participant)

#### *Senses of Body-self: Negative Perceptions*

Many women did not accept their aging bodies. They thought about and felt bad with their aging bodies both externally and internally.

#### **Senses of body-self as reckless—no body control or self care**

Women tend to value themselves with regard to their external image from social expectation. Women not only look at their own body image, but they also stare at those of

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