



Consumption and the constitution of age: Expenditure patterns on clothing, hair and cosmetics among post-war 'baby boomers'



Julia Twigg^{a,*}, Shinobu Majima^b

^a School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NF, UK

^b Faculty of Economics, Gakushuin University, Japan

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ABSTRACT

The article addresses debates around the changing nature of old age, using UK data on spending on dress and related aspects of appearance by older women to explore the potential role of consumption in the reconstitution of aged identities. Based on pseudo-cohort analysis of Family Expenditures Survey, it compares spending patterns on clothing, cosmetics and hairdressing, 1961–2011. It concludes that there is little evidence for the 'baby boomers' as a strategic or distinctive generation. There is evidence, however, for increased engagement by older women in aspects of appearance: shopping for clothes more frequently; more involved in the purchase of cosmetics; and women over 75 are now the most frequent attenders at hairdressers. The roots of these patterns, however, lie more in period than cohort effects, and in the role of producer-led developments such as mass cheap fashion and the development of anti-ageing products.

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Introduction

The article addresses debates about the changing nature of old age and the potential role of consumption in this. It takes as its starting point work by Gilleard and Higgs (2000, 2013) and others who have argued that old age in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century has undergone a significant cultural shift associated with consumption, carried forward in particular by the 'baby boomer' generation. Most of such analyses concentrate on consumer durables and leisure. In this article we have focused instead on aspects of appearance and self-presentation in the form of spending on clothing, cosmetics and hairdressing for women. Closely linked to identity and selfhood, they offer a relevant arena in which to explore arguments about the changing meaning of later years, and shifting sources of identity and selfhood in

late modern capitalist society. We shall use these data to question claims about a distinctive consumption generation.

The reconstitution of ageing thesis

The reconstitution of ageing thesis argues that old age has undergone a shift in the late twentieth century under the impact of changes in relation to work, the family and personal identity. The normative life course, established in the early years of the twentieth century across western economies (Anderson, 1985), and broadly persisting in the UK until the 1980s, has been destabilised, giving ways to more fragmented individualised patterns. Traditional age ordering has weakened, with stages of life, and behaviour appropriate to them, less clearly prescribed. As a result later years are no longer the clearly defined, cultural scripted period, they once seemed.

These shifts support the emergence in across western economies of the Third Age as a distinct cultural space. A period post-retirement, freed from the constraints of work

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: j.m.twigg@kent.ac.uk (J. Twigg), Shinobu.majima@gmail.com (S. Majima).

and, to some degree, family responsibility, is marked by leisure, pleasure and self development. Defined as a state rather than an age, it roughly maps onto the fifties to seventies. The concept has been criticized: for describing the lives of a section of older people – the affluent middle class – and for presenting an aspirational version of this; for projecting the difficulties of old age into a dark Fourth Age of disability and decline; and, through its emphasis on choice and agency, implicitly providing an ideological support for a neo-liberal restructuring of the welfare state (Phillipson, 1998, 2013; Walker, 2012). Some theorists (Öberg & Tornstam, 1999, 2001) suggest that the stage is better conceptualized in terms of an extended plateau of late middle years, that only ceases with the eruption of ill health and disability; and they link this to a declining salience of age ordering at all stages of life, with adulthood forming an undifferentiated period between childhood and frail old age.

The thesis is also linked to ideas concerning identity. Under conditions of post- or late-modernity, traditional formations of class, gender – and to a degree age – become less central, as identities are less socially entrenched, more the product of agency and choice. Consumption here assumes a new significance as a source of identity, performing an integrative function in an increasingly individualised culture (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Paterson, 2006). In relation to older people, consumption offers a possibility of counteracting the cultural exclusion traditionally associated with age, as they join younger cohorts in a common pursuit of consumption oriented lifestyles. Such integration, of course, rests on resources. Though in the period from the 1960s to today the incomes of some pensioners have risen, many remain in poverty, producing a dual trend in the UK, towards greater heterogeneity among older people, combined with greater similarity in relation to the general population. Jones et al. (2008) suggest that this dual pattern extends to cultural identity also.

Lastly these changes have occurred in the context of major demographic shift that has occurred across advanced western societies. In the UK, between 1901 and 2003 the proportion of the population aged 50 and over increased from 15 to 30%; and it is projected to rise to 41% in 2031 (Tomassini, 2005). Though the shift is long term, it has been particularly pronounced recently with the passing through of the 'baby boomer' generation.

'Baby boomers': a pioneer generation?

Arguments about the changing nature of age are often associated with ideas of the 'baby boomers' as a 'special' or pioneering generation (Biggs, Phillipson, Leach, & Money, 2007; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Edmunds and Turner (2002) describe them as a 'strategic generation in aesthetic, cultural and sexual terms...the first [...] to live through a time when mass consumer revolution transformed popular taste' (quoted by Phillipson, 2007). Others have depicted them less flatteringly, as a narcissistic generation, greedy in their appropriation of resources, selfish in their pursuit of hedonistic individualism (Stewart & Torges, 2006; Willetts, 2010).

The debate is confused by varying demographics in different western countries (Phillipson, 2007). In the US, the home of the 'baby boomer' terminology, there was a

sustained surge in births from the mid 1940s to the mid 1960s. In some European countries (Finland) (Karisto, 2007), there was a peak immediate after the war; in others (Germany) there was no significant surge at all. The UK had a distinctive pattern of two separate peaks, one in the late forties, and the other in the mid sixties. In line with other UK work, we focus on the first peak, previously known as the post-war 'bulge'.

A more sophisticated version of the baby boomer thesis is provided by Gilleard and Higgs in their concept of 'generational habitus' (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002, 2007; Higgs et al., 2009). They recognize the problems presented by the use of 'generation' as an analytic category: its imprecision; the varying and contentious nature of the factors underlying it; its assumption that events – usually on the world stage – have an impact on identity and consciousness; and its assumed homogeneity within the group. Drawing on Bourdieu, however, they argue for a concept of 'generational habitus' that arises from a particular generational field that develops through time. They suggest that 'people are not just affected by the historical period in which they grow up and live out their lives but that this set of circumstances also gives rise to a "generational style" which produces a distinct consciousness of those experiences' (Higgs et al., 2009, p. 105). They describe the 'generational habitus' of the generation who came to adulthood in the sixties as 'marked by rising living standards, the growth of consumer culture and the expansion of youth culture' producing a commodification of lifestyle and an erosion of status and tradition (Higgs et al., 2009, p. 106). The carriers of this 'generational habitus', they argue, are marked out from those who precede them; and they carry this difference with them as they grow old. In a related empirical work, they attempt to demonstrate this generational effect through an analysis of UK Family Expenditures Survey (FES) data on consumer durables and leisure, 1968–2005 (Jones et al., 2008).

We too use FES data to interrogate ideas about age, consumption and social change, but concentrate instead on appearance and dress, exploring expenditure on clothing, hairdressing and cosmetics. These have an intimate bodily character that makes them particularly relevant to questions of identity and selfhood. They also allow us to relate our analyses to a second set of debates, concerning the body and its role in the constitution of age.

Dress, the body and the presentation of self

Work on the body has proliferated over the last two decades. Social gerontology was initially slow to engage with this, fearing to reinforce a retrogressive emphasis on the bio-medical basis of age, undermining the achievements of the Political Economy school in establishing its socially constructed nature (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Estes, 1979; Phillipson, 1998). With the emergence of Cultural Gerontology, however, interest has grown in the body in age, with ageing increasingly understood as the product of a complex interplay between bodily and cultural factors (Andersson, 2002; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Cole, 1992; Cole, Ray, & Kastenbaum, 2010; Gilleard & Higgs, 2013; Gullette, 1997, 2011; Hurd Clarke, 2011; Katz, 1996; Tulle, 1999; Twigg, 2013; Woodward, 1991, 1999).

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