

FROM FLASHES TO LIFECYCLES

HOW AGE-DIVERSITY CAN FEED PROSPERITY FASHION

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Abstract

Production and marketing of fashion are organized into very short cycles of substitution with overconsumption of styles, attention and people. Collections are short-lived, and the window exposing models is soon closed. Revitalization and replacement go hand in hand, but the couple seems to become increasingly out of time and at odds with a new cultural awareness calling for restructuration, holistic views and regenerative practices for a common good (Buckton et al., 2023). Naturally, for the industry's changes to appear as authentic, they need to include the practise of marketing. For this purpose, this article will contribute to defining the concept of prosperity fashion from an interdisciplinary perspective by untangling the narrow visual marketing narrative intertwining fashion and youth and exploring the possibilities for widening the scope to including mature people as an integral, aesthetic part of fashion branding. Furthermore, it will suggest central discursive building blocks in the aesthetic construction of the industry's position as part of a natural world of longer and more natural lifecycles.

Keywords: *Age diversity, Fashion, Branding, Aesthetics*

INTRODUCTION

In fashion newness triumphs and youth is branded as an asset, while the loss of capital connected to age has spread from the social to the financial domain. The idea of fashion as a source of renewal is still strong (Dichter, 1985), and a central part of the narrative remains young and characterized by swift replacements. Media debates revolve about the unhealthy state of the hectic rate in renewal of products, but fashion marketing continues to march to the drum presenting tomorrow with great urgency. But what will it take to transform the fashion narrative to a breathable state, to prolong the spans and open the circles with inclusivity? From a communicative perspective, the question is, how can aesthetic age-diversity branding

contribute to constructing a new identity for the industry towards prosperity fashion with a cultural and narrative turn away from the traditional GDP-thinking?

With a point of departure in the social and cultural significance of youth's predominance in fashion, the article will identify the aesthetic markers of age in terms of the traditional narrative of maturity and fashion's understanding of beauty, value and age. It will investigate research on the mature crowd in terms of identity construction, lifestyles and attitudes towards fashion, and reflect on the different levels of integration of the aesthetic capital of age into fashion pointed out by Bøileregauge (2020) as well as marketing's effect on identity formation (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2004).

This will lead to the article's purpose of reframing the existing branding narrative in a new holistic approach where the connotations of aesthetics of age becomes a value enhancing the understanding of fashion as a contributor to prosperity from a more diverse perspective.

Consequently, the article explores how an inclusive representation can develop visual narratives of age-diversity and full life courses of models as parallels to what may be called full life courses of garments. The outcome suggests a range of potential discursive building blocks in the aesthetic construction of a new position for the industry, where it subscribes to a natural system of longer lifecycles rather than an endless series of flashes in terms of seasons and moments in youth. The article rests on interpretative work with a selective review of material and feeds into the development of prosperity fashion by its contribution with a framework and discursive platform. The interdisciplinary perspective of the article is based on a foundation of social constructionism as presented by Giddens (1991) with reflexivity as a central property. The visual branding discourse of fashion is viewed as aesthetic bricks in the construction of meaning with the narratives forming self-identity for the industry and its customers alike, and this approach allows deliberations of mechanisms at different levels.

THE TRADITION OF DISPOSABILITY IN A CHANGING MARKET CULTURE

Even though fashion is the protagonist for change, some areas seem to form an exception, since in its presentation the newer focus on longevity appears to be reserved to discourse about garments. Youth has been the main presenter of fashion for so many decades, that it can be regarded as a norm. The Guardian reports that the recent usage of older models was short lived, and that age-diversity is back to the situation of the 90s. It describes the industry's demand for the young, skinny and tall, and refers to the unease in the use of older models who were either too exposed, too covered or stereotyped as being eccentric (Hill, 2023). Vogue.com also discusses the youth focus of the industry with its practise of recruiting models often not old enough to drive a car into a profession of revolving doors and a culture of disposability. The habit of continuous casting of new and

young talents requires replacement of models at a high rate. It creates an industry where news is made by headlines announcing that models under 16 will not be hired for work where they represent adults. In a wider perspective, the practice of the youth obsession is also linked to the pressure on grown customers to maintain an adolescent look (Okwodu, 2019). It seems that the culture of disposability engenders a range of problematic mechanisms both in terms of work continuity, employment possibilities and by creating an exceptionally narrow source for identification.

The continuous replacement of models and the short narratives they inhabit also prompt contemplations of the practise foundations and a search for main elements used to communicate this celebrated life stage. A central characteristic in the presentation of youth is smoothness, and this has developed into a beau idéal in commercial photography. Iqani (2012) traces the idealization of smoothness back to Burke's description of beauty in 1756 and follows its historical development of social status and evaluations of skin. Developing a typology, she outlines the connotations of smoothness as civilization, culture, safety and a refined state as opposed to roughness connoting danger, wilderness and the unrefined. The two sets of connotations appear to match the social perceptions of young and mature skin – in other words youth and maturity. Illustrations of the wanted and the avoided cultivated through centuries and refined by visual marketing. However, not everybody continues to identify with the traditional prescriptions.

Scholarly work presents interesting findings in contrast to fashion's branding's landscape of youth and considers the state and potential of the mature market. It seems that mature people are not as disengaged in fashion as the stereotypes prescribe. Sadkowska et al. (2017) found that men enjoy their engagement with fashion increasingly as they age, but still Eser (2024) notes that that 70% of the world's models are under the age of 25. Susan Douglas observes that older women reinvent what it means to be older while they challenge the traditional invisibility (Bennett, 2019). In addition, it appears that the fashion-conscious segment often have younger cognitive ages, and they have different value orientations combined with an eagerness to try new products (Nam et al., 2007). Combined with an increasingly older demographic, where the 50-55-year-olds are the

largest population group in Europe, the market is shifting in size, culture and mood but the industry most often sticks to its younger guns in marketing despite the wider implications of this practise (Eurostat, 2020).

THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF YOUTH'S PREDOMINANCE IN FASHION MARKETING

Marketing carries a responsibility far greater than merely communicating the seasonal trends. Naturally, this so also for fashion marketing. Borgerson and Schroeder (2005) discuss how marketing functions as a representational system producing meaning outside the scope of what is being promoted. They draw attention to the effects of the representational conventions in the ways marketing illustrates not only products but also people and identities, how it rests on contexts of cultural meanings and thus become cultural texts. It is particularly relevant to notice their stipulation that marketing images often replace personal experience and construct a fictive "reality" with substantial authority. In that light, the much-advertised business of fashion can be considered a major contributor to general perceptions with its marketing communication displaying a narrow range of models while leaving others out. Here it is important to remember that omissions communicate values, and that also underrepresentation fuels social stereotypification. Moreover, studying Borgerson and Schroeder's considerations on how the status of human beings is determined by visual markers such as gender or skin colour, brings the state of fashion branding to mind. With its very young population, the "reality" presented teaches the lesson that being fashionable is reserved to youth residing at the top of the culturally defined hierarchy. As being fashionable is also an indication of status, the inherent argument is that fashion is a closed circle for people exhibiting the social capital of youth.

Furthermore, Borgerson and Schroeder highlight the subjectivity of visual representation and urge further research into the complex world of commercial image-executives. That area is discussed with The Aesthetic Production Model giving an overview of the host of actors in the production of fashion images (Bøilerehaug, 2023). In addition to the complexity of the production chain, it also identifies the many different industries and professions active in the process which

suggests a shared tendency value to a visually narrow culture. The uniform culture is representing fashion for individual consumption where consumers go through phases of tacit interpretation and are unconsciously influenced as pointed out by Schroeder and Borgerson (2004). In other words, they consume the material of an industry promoting a tight circle marked by hierarchical practices of exclusion and very short life cycles.

In addition to the social and cultural impact on consumers' self-identities, the short timespan for models representing fashion appears in stark contrast to the industry's newer claim of durability of its products in style and fabrics. With these contrasting signals continually emitted, the authenticity of the sustainable efforts appears flawed and what is more, they may be intended for a market of the past. A market which disregarded the mature segment and assumed that they had faded while dreaming of their remote youth, and a market with structures requiring substantial revision and re-thinking.

TOWARDS A NARRATIVE OF AGE IN A PERSPECTIVE OF PROSPERITY FASHION

For fashion to regain its attraction and strengthen its authenticity, a more varied visual marketing narrative reflecting the vision of the regenerative perspectives with the qualities of high diversity, agency for humans and continuous reflexivity is needed (Buckton et al., 2023). The narrative must be redesigned to distance itself from promoting longevity only in garments, while rapidly replacing young models thus mirroring how consumers constantly update their fashion items. The speed and short timeframes of production and marketing alike continue subscribing to the themes of youth and novelty with little acknowledgement of the state of the outside world and its people.

A visual fashion narrative reflecting the visions of prosperity fashion embraces a number of conditions and recent characteristics of mature people. The more varied and comprehensive aesthetic marketing narrative needs to communicate an understanding of age, maturity and what they imply. A selection of studies in this area informs the revision and development of a narrative away from the stereotypical perceptions of maturity by a range of pertinent findings.

Departing from the chronological age categorizations, the mature and elderly group is

most often counted from 65 years and onwards (Berg & Liljedal, 2022). Generational categorizations are frequently referred to in public, but the media also report on people in their middle years feeling much younger than their chronological age. They use headings like “60 is the new 50” and even with subtitles like “- according to science and the 60-year-olds” (Alpanés, 2024). Although age is related to time, the meaning of it is socially and historically established (Catterall & Maclaren, 2001), and consequently also fashion plays a part in its formation.

The internal construction of self-identity as related to age is represented by the notion of cognitive age which is the self-perceived or subjective age of a person. Interestingly, research has labelled a relevant sub-group of these as the cognitively young elderly consumers, characterized as being active and closely related to the modern consumer (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2001). Berg and Liljedal (2022) discuss the importance of looking beyond the exterior and the large groups according to age, explore consumer identities and describe them with a view to consumer culture and identity. Studies to that purpose have also identified the sub-culture of the new-age elderly. They exhibit the characteristics of having different values from the traditional part of the elderly group and to have a keen interest in personal challenges, novel experiences and new information (Sherman et al., 2001). Similarly, Givskov and Nybro Petersen (2018) refer to a new aging due to increasingly older demographics and the growth in Western consumer-cultures. They identify ageing as a cultural field and describe it as a social and fluid space; a view which allows negotiation and more individual identity constructions.

Exploring the identity construction and consumption motivations of older adults through storytelling, Fregolente and Junqueira (2019) point to the relevance of examining older adults in the context of the time and life circumstances they have. By doing that, a perspective of process is maintained as opposed to regarding mature age as a destination. The personal continued process also seems to be reflected in a set of their findings showing that their respondents valued knowledge and education, exhibited no aversion to technology and wished to part of present society and culture. Even though the respondents were socially and financially affluent, the findings still spark interest since they counter the prevailing

stereotypes of mature people and indicate a profile different from the more traditional one. Additionally, Rocha et al. found that the mature consumers do not change their juvenile-like attitudes or look to the attitudes of previous generations concerning their fashion consumption (2015). Furthermore, the cohort of mature women interviewed in by Phillips (2022) concerning their preferences in advertisements presenting women, stress the themes of being authentic, age-appropriate and attractive. In their view, attractiveness goes beyond looks of realistic mature women and add characteristics of intelligence, confidence and happiness. Rounding off the characteristics of the mature people as identified in research, it seems pertinent to mention their attitude to their own signs of maturity – the way they look. The signs of age are mostly avoided by fashion marketing but editing these away may be a misinterpretation of what the market wish, since less than 3% of Mair and Cili’s 40-89 years old respondents informed that they wore make-up to look younger (2016). However, as already reported by The Guardian, constructing a narrative of age-diversity in fashion is still not a customary exercise, and approaching the prosperity fashion narrative, discussions of existing marketing examples may educate the further development.

A central trait in fashion images is the endeavour to construct cool. Jerslev (2018) outlines cool as marked by an aesthetic of aloofness and individual rebellion among other characteristics. She draws attention to the inference by Pountain and Robbins (2000) that cool is not a question of age but an attitude which can be appropriated by all generations. An often-mentioned advertisement displaying the new cool is the Céline ad from 2015 by Juergen Teller displaying the writer and icon Joan Didion. Even though Didion is a celebrity and consequently has a different publicity status, the ad still displays her age as an element of distinction and by that communicates another narrative of age than the stereotypical version. Different ways of displaying age in fashion are also discussed by Bøilerehaug (2020) with her identification of three levels in the construction of age. In her analysis of how age is applied in SoMe branding, she finds that the aesthetic character of age varies when it used as an aesthetic intensifier, an element of distinctive cool or as a celebration of the aging body to the point where it becomes part of the brand’s capital. Consequently, age is not found to have one single aesthetic character in the analysis, but the integra-

tion of age as aesthetic capital is still common for the international fashion brands analysed.

The above range of scholarly findings contribute to a more nuanced and detailed comprehension of mature identities, lifestyle and relationships to fashion. When contrasted to the traditional narrative of maturity they appear to constitute a leap forward, and when regarding them as a revision and further development of the traditional understanding of maturity, their identification forms the framework of discursive building blocks of in the new aesthetic maturity

construction as presented in Table 01.

Table 01 displays the range of discursive building blocks identified in the selected literature and examined above. The table shows the new key elements in relation to age together with the markers of youth and the stereotypical perceptions of age as found by Bøilerehaug (2024) in her elaboration of skin structure connotations, their perceived values and position in marketing. With its overview the table presents informed components for an aesthetic narrative of age-diversity rather than an exclusion of one group at the

Framework of discursive building blocks for the aesthetic construction of the age-diversity in a prosperity fashion perspective

Youth	Traditional maturity	Prosperity maturity
Attraction	Retrospection	Experience
Desirability	Loss	Curiosity
Social status	Decline	Age-independent self-identity
Seduction	Stagnation	Continuous development
Fertility	Self-deterioration	Vibrance
Refined state	Obsolescence	Contribution readiness
Luxury	The past	Openness towards new designs
Gain	A celebration	At ease with own appearance
Development		Younger cognitive age
Progress		Intelligence
Marketability		Confidence
The present		Happiness
The future		Activity
		Modern
		Personal challenges
		New experiences
		New information
		New knowledge and education
		Wishing to be part of the present
		Young-minded fashion consumption attitudes
		Authentic, age-appropriate and attractive
		Distinction
		An aesthetic intensifier
		An element of cool
		A celebration

Tab. 01

expense of the other. Consequently, the framework subscribes to the prosperity fashion qualities of high diversity, agency for humans and continuous reflexivity with purpose and contents alike (Buckton et al., 2023).

The three life stages of the building blocks reveal the sharp contrast between the positive aspects of Youth versus the negative aspects of Traditional maturity. However, the generally haralading depiction of Youth is in opposition to numerous surveys elsewhere stressing its problems and fragile state far from the marketed youth glamour (World Economic Forum). Another notable contrast made evident by the framework is the inherent perception of destination in Traditional maturity versus the signals of process in Prosperity maturity.

Relating elements of the framework to the contextual state of affairs, for example Vibrance and Wishing to be part of the present are reflected in statistics and needs for new marketing practise alike. The State of Fashion 2025 report informs that the Silver Generation aged over 50 accounted for 25% of the global population in 2020, and it calls for their activation by brands (Balchandani et al.). Besides, the report recommends identification of inter-generational customer segments on values rather than the traditional marketing approach. Finally, the report finds that half of the women in their 50s are more style-conscious than when in their 20s, and at EU-level the mature crowd prioritizes product value 25%points above the average. This development appears somehow encompassed in the Burberry Christmas 2024 campaign where the elderly couple, Drs. Herschel and Lilly Stoller were cast for their love and constant use of the brand (Veitch, 2024). Also Valentino has used mature models on their catwalks. When presenting its AW 2022 collection, the brand was praised for its numerous mature models. A similar cast was used by designer Alessandro Michele showing his spring 2025 debut couture collection for Valentino while commenting on the cast with the remark: "Time provides grace" (Cartner-Morley, 2025). The boldest mature cast however was seen at the Italian brand Sunnei's catwalk exclusively showing models at the age of 50 and older in their SS2025 presentation (Ahluwalia & Rhodes, 2024). The brand thus highlighted both Vibrance and Participation in the present in practise (Fig. 01).

The proposed framework can be

implemented in the industry structures in a number of ways. As a first step towards increased age diversity, catwalk casts can be published in overviews of age diversity in each major fashion city similar to the Vogue Business size inclusivity reports (Maguire & Shoaib, 2024). As a second step, fashion weeks can implement diversity requirements as part of their policies. To broaden the implementation, a third step have to include diversity programmes in the supply chain of models beginning with the modeling and influencer agencies, the casting agencies and the fashion brands. Naturally, the state of fashion age diversity needs to be monitored also in communication from organizations and media since mediatization of events, campaigns and business news plays a part in displaying a wider scale of diversity cues. Regular publication of such state-of-affairs surveys can support development of the fashion industry in a more sustainable direction on the social parameter of age diversity.

Concerning the terminology of the framework, applying the term aesthetic rather than just visual allows an extra dimension in the discussion and application of the framework and its building blocks. Whereas the term visual may appear more straightforward, aesthetic invites contextual contemplations. The present definition of aesthetic regards objects not only by their function, but also objects for sensory experience by means of their shape, material, texture, and potential meaning and rests on the work of Folkmann and Jensen (2017). Consequently, the objects are considered together with the contextual forces creating meaning. The contextual and reflexive perspectives are also inherent in the present discussions, and it matches the approaches towards connotations and understandings of texture and age by Iquani (2012) and Bøilerehaug (2024) forming the sources informing the basis of Table 01.

CONCLUSION

The article set out to contribute to defining the concept of prosperity fashion from an interdisciplinary perspective. Looking into the intertwined visual marketing narrative of fashion and youth, Okwodu's observations on disposability and the habitual casting of young fashion models (2019) inspired the examination of the connotations of smoothness and texture as illustrated by Iqani (2012). Juxtaposing these observations with



Fig. 01

scholarly work on the mature crowd's self-identities, lifestyle and attitudes to fashion gave a view into the gaps between the narrow practices, the stereotypes and the new realities. The discussion of marketing's effects on identity formation (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2004) contributed with contemplations regarding the disparity between the fashion industry's claim to sustainability by marketing of long product lifecycles and its continuous flashing of young replaceable models.

The potential in including mature models as an integral, aesthetic part of fashion branding was explored by an examination of research on age concepts and the implications of cognitive age and its sub-categorisations. The themes of continued process in life (Fregolente & Junqueira, 2019) and the mature cohort's positive attitudes towards their own appearance were some of the observations sustaining the new narrative of age-diversity. Furthermore, the building blocks of the suggested narrative framework were based on the characteristics of cool as laid out by Jerslev (2018) and by the three levels in the construction of age in fashion branding (Bøilerehaug, 2020).

Consequently, the range of aesthetic

building blocks were based on research relevant for considering the age concept and on the industry's and the mature market's perceptions of it. Additionally, the deliberations were reflected in research in the social and cultural implications of marketing. Implications affecting both consumers and the fashion industry's reputation negatively. On that basis, the building blocks present an opportunity for the industry to anchor its narrative in the prosperity fashion qualities signalling diversity, agency for humans and continuous reflexivity (Buckton et al.) as they reflect the new old and welcome them in the circle of doers rather than onlookers.

DISCUSSION

Strengthening the fashion industry's position as part of a natural world of longer and more natural lifecycles appears urgent. A new aesthetic narrative of age-diversity and full life courses of models as a parallel to the sustainable claim can be a first step in the right direction. However, research can also move further ahead and illuminate fashion's way to doing good in a wider branding scale, since its present culture may have more impact than previously examined. In a wider perspective, the fashion industry's omission or scarce representation of mature models may have negative consequences also on the omitted segment. In this respect, the work on identity formation in terms of age-identity and subjective well-being by Westerhof and Barrett (2005) is worthy of mention. If regarding the omissions of mature fashion models as tacit stereotypification signalling that mature people cannot pass the value threshold, the practice forms an obstacle to the mature crowd's potential self-enhancing strategy and their difficulties with preventing internalization of ageist stereotypes. Mature people are found to feel younger than their actual age but what is more, their age identity is significantly related to their subjective wellbeing, and subjective wellbeing has been found higher for people not internalizing stereotypes. Consequently, further research into the effects of the invisibility of maturity on the mature cohort and their wellbeing can be illustrative for the industry in its endeavours to become more sustainable also from a social perspective.

Prosperity fashion and the worldview in Buckton et al's vision of a Regenerative Lens, with the qualities of wellbeing, high diversity and continuous reflexivity, can inspire further develop-

ment of the narrative of age-diversity in fashion marketing. A regenerative design with a holistic perspective on fashion branding is needed for integrating people and nature in terms of natural processes as the course of life is. The perspective of lifelong human agency must be clearly communicated in fashion to make it reflect and further cultural and social diversity. It calls for an industrial engagement in repeated experimentation and increased awareness of the building blocks of the aesthetic construction of age diversity for the industry to move towards a position where its fame is not only connoted to well-dressed but also to wellbeing.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Sunnei faces SS25. With kind permission from Sunnei.

[Tab. 01] The framework of discursive building blocks for the aesthetic construction of the age-diversity in a prosperity fashion perspective. Inspired by Iqani (2012) and Bøilerehaug (2024).

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