The self-perceived age of GenX women: prioritising female subjective age identity in marketing

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Structured Abstract

- **Purpose**

We examine the phenomenon of self-perceived age (SPA) identity for Generation X (GenX) women in the UK. Squeezed between the more ubiquitous 'boomer' and 'millennial' cohorts, and now with both gender and age stigma-related challenges, we look to provide insights for understanding this group for marketing.

- **Design/methodology/approach**

We adopt an existential phenomenological approach using a hybrid structured/hermeneutic research design. Data is collected using solicited diary research (SDR) that elicits autoethnographic insights into the lived experiences of GenX women, these in the context of self-perceived age.

Findings

For this group, we find age a gendered phenomenon represented via seven 'age frames', collectively an 'organisation of experience'. Age identity appears not to have unified meaning but is contingent upon individuals and their experiences. These frames then provide further insights into how diarists react to the stigma of gendered ageism.

- **Research limitations/implications**

SDR appeals to participants who like completing diaries and are motivated by the research topic. This limits both diversity of response and sample size, but coincidentally enhances elicitation potential - outweighing, we believe, these constraints. Our sample comprises UK women only.

- **Practical implications**

We acknowledge GenX women as socially real, but from a SPA perspective they are heterogeneous, and consequently distributed across many segments. Here, age is a psychographic, not demographic, variable - a subjective rather than chronological condition requiring a nuanced response from marketers.

- **Originality**

As far as we are aware, this is the first formal study into how SPA identity is manifested for GenX women. Methodologically, we use e-journals/diaries, an approach not yet fully exploited in marketing research.

Keywords: Self-perceived age identity; Generation X women; marketing segmentation; framing; solicited diary research; stigma.

Introduction

Society favours youthfulness over maturity, this perceived as attractive (Amatulli *et al*., 2018), desirable and achievable (Twigg, 2018). Self-perceived Age (SPA - Rosow, 1967) is a product of agency and options where "age is just a number" (Goulding and Shankar, 2004, p. 641), personally viewed rather than linked to date-of-birth. However, chronological age (CA) – "a linear count between the time a person is born and the current date" (Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2021, p.3) - is often used as a variable for understanding consumer choice (Chaney *et al.*, 2017). The limitations, though, of CA segmentation have long been argued (Moschis, 1996; Wolfe, 1997). Kuppelwieser and Klaus (2021) say this is an unreliable yardstick and that SPA - the age an individual experiences themselves to be (Montepare, 2009) - is a more authentic indicator of age identity, an 'ongoing project' guided by what people do and who they believe they are (Cook, 2018). Indeed, it is claimed that many 'older' consumers, for example, view themselves often as younger than CA (Amatulli *et al.*, 2015; Bordone *et al*., 2020; Morelock *et al.*, 2017), and that they experience a more self-determined 'postmodern lifecourse' (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991).

Consumption is an extension of self (Belk, 1988), and at midlife and beyond consumers may opt to dress younger (Thorpe, 2018), alter physical appearance (Reisenwitz and Fowler, 2018) or use youth-oriented brands to bolster identity (Amatulli *et al*., 2015). Collectively, these are said to confer enhanced self-perception (Sirgy, 2018), allowing female consumers, especially, the agency to market themselves (Reisenwitz and Fowler, 2018). Rewards are seen as increased social acceptability (Thorpe, 2018) and the circumvention of age-based stereotyping (Amatulli *et al.*, 2018; Levy, 2009; Zee and Weiss, 2019). Prior studies of UK female consumers further, though, suggest that age is a gendered experience (e.g. Birtwistle and Tsim, 2005; Szmigin and

Carrigan, 2002), an especial source of stereotyping (Barrett, 2005), that arbitrarily disadvantages and performs them.

This 'double standard' of ageing (Sontag, 1972) – also conceived as an asymmetry of age-based stereotype threat (Lamont *et al*., 2015; Manzi *et al*., 2019) - arise from the intersectional (McCall, 2005), or 'mutually constitutive' (Meliou and Mallett, 2022), confluence of gender and age (gendered ageing) and have emerged as an object of post-millennial concern – for women a challenge to identity and for researchers an issue to explore (e.g. Atkinson *et al*., 2021; Vos *et al*., 2018; Pilcher and Martin, 2020). The challenge is further intensified by the stigma (Goffman, 1963) that attaches to this, its effect embodied through socially demeaning acts of 'gendered ageism' (Itzin and Phillipson, 2005) to be either endured (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012) countered (Veresiu and Parmentier, 2021) or confronted (Cecil *et al*., 2022).

A marketing focus on CA resonates with these concerns, with 'generations' – a special case of CA - also seen as an especially useful segmentation variable (Williams and Page, 2011; Schewe and Noble, 2000). It has been suggested that historical macro-environmental changes influence people born in a specific era, in turn, imprinting commonalities of behaviour (Howe and Strauss, 2000). And although the suggestion of within-generations homogeneity has been challenged (e.g. Gardiner *et al*., 2013; Sudbury-Riley *et al*., 2015) this remains attractive to both marketers (e.g. Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Morgan Stanley, 2019; Parker and Igielnik, 2020) and researchers (e.g. Eger *et al*., 2021; Fernandes and Iverneiro, 2021; Ivanova *et al*., 2019). This present study is focused on one aspect (women) of one such group (Generation X - GenX), defined as those born between 1965 and 1976 (Mitchell *et al.*, 2005). Despite the apparent importance of age-identity to this group - with 54% reportedly wishing to look younger than their CA (Mintel, 2021) – there is still more to be learnt about their age-related

self-perceptions and how these might impact consumption, especially as these women now approach 'third age' (Laslett, 1987).

Essentially, we look to ascertain whether GenX women now are either 'just' a chronologically defined social group, or whether - for marketing purposes - they are a segment that is sensitive to age-related appeals. We use an existential-phenomenological approach (Thompson, *et al.*, 1989), deploying online solicited diary research (SDR) to help surface the lived age-related worlds of this commercially salient group. Our aim is to help marketers better understand GenX women's age-related self-concept as this group now confronts gendered ageing and the concomitant stigma of 'gendered ageism'. But, beyond this, also as they explore the potential for renegotiating their personal visibility, no longer to remain in the shadow of men and to be viewed, positively, on their own terms (Marshall, 2018; Pilcher and Martin, 2020). In so doing, we contribute to a broader understanding of the overlapping agendas of SPA, women and marketing, and address both mercantile and social concerns.

Literature Review

Age is a 'master status' helping define where one fits in society (Gullette, 2015). Formal age identity (Pickard, 2016) was established, in the UK for example, via the welfare state's chronology of the life course protocol (Givskov and Petersen, 2018). Here, age markers are historic, physical, or normative interpersonal circumstances that make CA socially embedded (Mirowsky and Ross, 1999). It is claimed, however, that both age *identity* and the *experience* of ageing are neither fixed nor socially entrenched, but rather fluid and flexible (Cook, 2018; Gilleard and Higgs, 2014) determined by lifestyle, not date of birth (Goulding and Shankar, 2004; Schiffman and Sherman, 1991, Amatulli *et al*., 2015), an issue of 'personal volition' (Marshall, 2018). In the sections below we explore the marketing segmentation implications of

this in the context of the GenX woman, and relate these collectively to issues of the self, gendered ageing and stigma.

Self-concept and Subjective Age Identity

Rosenberg (1979, p.7) suggests self-concept is the "totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself (*sic*) as an object" and this is increasingly recognised as the most promising focus for marketing (Foxall, 2016). Consumers behave in ways consistent with their self-concept; that is, the subjective self-perception of their ideal self, or how they would 'like to be' (Sirgy, 2018). Importantly, age is a key aspect of self-concept, and age self-identification is key to how people behave (Blau, 1956). The literature identifies a range of terms and ideas that have been associated with subjective (or non-chronological) age and these, and indicative/significant sources, are identified in Fig. 1. Although not strictly longitudinally organised (it is more about ideas than dates), this traces key understandings about the nature of age – expressed as age 'types' or 'age identity constructs' – from the 1950s to today.

These ideas follow two principal paths – one focused on functional (rational) perspectives on non-chronological age, and the other on subjective (idiosyncratic) perspectives. For the first (see Figure 1., pale blue boxes), Heron and Chown (1967) concluded that ageing is not a 'one-size-fits-all' process and that chronology is a poor proxy for age. They thus introduced 'Functional Age', combining physical health, mental alertness and psychological characteristics. Moschis (1996; 2000) synthesised this further, ultimately suggesting three functional age classifications: Biological Age, Social Age and Psychological Age. Biological Age (also referred to as Physiological Age) refers to an individual's physical condition and includes physiological changes and mental functioning (see also Jarvik, 1975); Social (or Sociological) Age is socially constructed and defined by social roles, behaviours, relationships

and norms (see also Elder, 1975; Moschis, 2000); and Psychological age refers to cognitive functioning and personality.

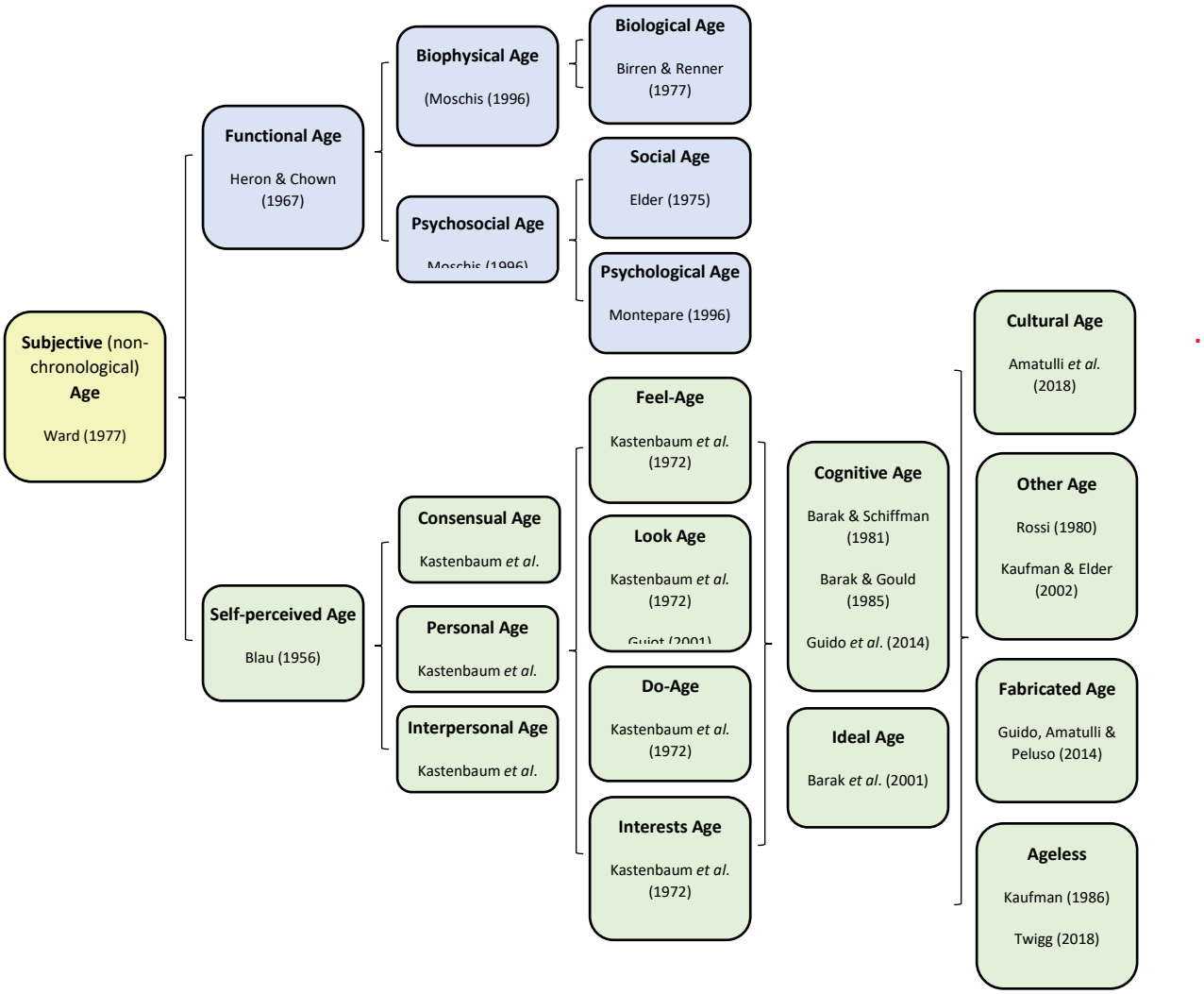

Figure 1. Map of subjective (non-chronological) age identity constructs

Source: Derived from a study-specific content analysis of the literature

By way of contrast, the SPA path (see Figure 1., pale green boxes) suggests age is not just biologically or socially endorsed, but a personal, individually authorised phenomenon (Blau,

1956; Rosow, 1967; Ward, 1977). Kastenbaum, *et al.*'s (1972) 'ages of me' construct sought to explain the different ways in which age might be subjectively construed, and though their taxonomy is pitched in the *context* of Functional Age, they dispute that notion. First, they propose Personal Age, defined as "the self-report of his (*sic*) age status: how old he seems to himself (*sic*)" (Kastenbaum *et al*., 1972, p. 209). This was further disaggregated into four personal age sub-types: Feel Age, Look Age, Do-Age and Interests Age. Second, is Interpersonal age, or the age others *believe* another might be, and third is Consensual Age, where personal age and interpersonal age converge. Collectively, these have been associated with Cognitive Age (Barak and Schiffman, 1981; Guido *et al*., 2014) and Ideal Age (or the age a person would prefer to be: Barak, 2009). Other perspectives in this path are Other Age (e.g. Kaufman and Elder, 2002), the age an *individual* believes others perceive them to be; Fabricated Age, an age an individual might inappropriately claim (Guido *et al.*, 2014); Cultural Age, focusing on how age is constructed through representation, interaction, and communication (Settersten Jr and Hägestad, 1996; Amatulli *et al*., 2018); and the self-explanatory, Ageless (e.g. Kaufman, 1986).

The evidence cited above draws on an essentially structuralist and often psychologically-influenced canon that posits age as a phenomenon amenable to categorisation, nominalist instantiation, and statistical verification. It demonstrates an approach that is extensively pursued in the marketing/consumer behaviour literature where age is considered, primarily, a condition readily acquiescent to segmentation and targeting (see section further below). There are other approaches – for example in research focused on consumer culture (e.g. Barnhart and Peñaloza, 2013; Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2022; McCabe *et al*., 2020) but we note from our review that the sensed, rather than measured, perspective is much less well-

represented and is focused more on experience than on typology. We use Figure 1, therefore, as a backdrop or reference point for helping shape our analysis.

Despite being viewed through a different epistemological lens, the SPA path acknowledges (and in some cases prefigures), the postmodern notion of age as a contested experience (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991). Postmodernism suggests that consumers create personalised representations of themselves (Firat and Schultz, 1997), and suggests individuals within otherwise apparently homogeneous groups (e.g. age cohorts) consume not as rituals of normative behaviour but for self-expression (Goulding, 2003). In this account consumers are defined by the practices they acquire, their avoidance of typecasting, and a focus on style and appearance (Simmons, 2008). According to Jagger (2005, p. 102), "In postmodernity, anatomy is no longer destiny…", whilst Polivka (2000, p. 213) asserts that the postmodern social actor prioritises "multiple identities and self-descriptions outside ageist categories and the need for a stable, integral, enduring sense of self." Biggs (1999) further draws attention to the way that age identity can be configured via both horizontal (as represented to the world) and vertical (as represented to the self) individually-sited narratives.

Stigma, consumption and age

As people age, these narratives may act as a mechanism for the management of stigma (Cecil, *et al.*, 2022). The origins of stigma theory are well documented in both the marketing/consumption (e.g. Crosby and Otnes, 2010; Crockett, 2017; Harmeling *et al*., 2021) and gerontology (e.g. Cary and Chasteen, 2015; Katz and Marshall, 2003; Syme and Cohn, 2021) literatures, and focus on the significant contribution of Erving Goffman (1963). Goffman (1963) characterises stigma as a personal 'mark' or attribute that is somehow socially devalued (a 'spoiled identity'), and that causes those who perceive themselves to be

stigmatised to seek either to regulate or mask that 'mark' or attribute. Eichert and Luedicke (2022) note how consumption has been theorised as a strategic defence against stigmatisation, whilst in gerontology, age itself is positioned as typical of those 'marks' or attributes that stigmatise (Widrick and Raskin, 2010).

Cary and Chasteen (2015) note the multidimensionality of age stigma, identifying how this manifests in varying ways. On the one hand it may be benevolently intended (e.g. offering a seat on a bus) or alternatively can lead to rejection (e.g. exclusion from events for which individuals may be deemed 'age-inappropriate'). It can be experienced in more subtle ways also, with specific behaviours or habits of others in the same age-band assumed as universal or 'identity threat', a hazard to one's individuality imposed by society (Major and O'Brien, 2005). In this respect, stigma correlates with both stereotyping and discrimination (Link and Phelan, 2001) and it has thus been suggested (Rosenthal *et al*., 2021) that those in older age groups, especially, look to distance themselves from stereotypes in order to reclaim their identity. Kuppelwieser and Klaus (2021), Zee and Weiss (2019) and Moschis (2012) have all argued that SPA thus represents a more faithful representation of age-identity, acting as a bulwark against social and cultural conditioning (Morelock *et al*., 2017). SPA may therefore be seen as 'masquerade' which, according to Biggs (2004, p.46) "…. draws on the idea that identity is performative: put on, so to speak, in a particular context and for a specific audience, even if that audience exists in the inner world of the self." At different times, and for specific purposes, therefore, SPA contributes to a bundle of multifaceted identities, each of which will vary over time (Cook, 2018) – integral to an identity-building process that is both ongoing and reflexive.

Market Segmentation and age

Segmentation involves dividing a mass market into smaller units, with common characteristics pertinent to marketers' goals (Baines *et al.,* 2022). Marketing activities may thus be directed at those deemed most responsive to those activities, allowing for efficient/effective deployment of resources (Blyth, 2014). Traditionally, three broad segmentation methods have been employed (Goyat, 2011): demographic profiling (addressing *who* consumers are), behavioural profiling (addressing *what* consumers do) and psychographic profiling (addressing *why* consumers behave as they do). Demographic segmentation deploys factual consumer characteristics as signifiers; and is common in practice because such data is readily available (Walsh *et al.,* 2001). CA is just one such characteristic, but it has served marketers well, largely because consumers can easily be represented as archetypes in advertisements (Yankelovich, 1964).

A very specific CA-related segment – the generational cohort – is often also deployed (Chaney *et al.,* 2017). Those born in the same era are said to experience shared events that help embed common values and attitudes, predicting unified patterns of behaviour (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Koenig and Larsen, 2017; Williams and Page, 2011) that connect both the 'biological and the historical' (Marshall, 2018). Perhaps because they reinforce age stereotypes, generational cohorts have been considered more reliable and relatable than otherwise selected CA groups (Schewe and Noble, 2000). Although generational distinction is recognised elsewhere (e.g. in China there are the 'Consolidation', 'Cultural Revolution' and 'Social Reform' generations - Egri and Ralstone, 2004) for westernised economies the literature focuses primarily on 'Baby Boomers', 'Millennials' and – historically situated between these - 'Generation X' (those born from 1965 to 1980 - Meriac *et al.,* 2010; Katz 2017). This latter has also been named the invisible (Mitchell *et al.,* 2005) or lost (O'Brien and Liederman, 2022) generation. GenX is temporarily aligned with an emergent consumer culture and thus primed

to exercise agency in its buying behaviour (Howe and Strauss, 2007). In the USA, for example, GenX represents approximately 50 million consumers, and though this is the smallest of the three most frequently discussed generational cohorts, it is consistently reported (e.g. Lodha, 2022) to be the highest spending.

From a marketing perspective, disparities both between (e.g. Branchik *et al*., 2021; Gardiner *et al*., 2014) and within (Sudbury-Riley *et al*., 2015; Gardiner *et al*., 2013) generations have been observed, whilst Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2022) suggest that national culture may bind more than generational culture. These are all context-specific studies, though, and conclusions are contingent upon the generations explored and the factors used to evaluate them. GenX are said to be especially resistant to age-identity expectations, (Katz, 2017; Lissitsa and Kol, 2016; Givskov and Deuze 2018), and this is an issue of especial portent, given they are now at the threshold of the 'third age'. This is a category of flexible provenance, a 'collective circumstance' (Laslett, 1987) that signifies post-fulfilment (occupational, economic, physical) - a sustaining rather than striving into the future but not yet fourth age decline. According to Gilleard and Higgs (2014, p. 199) the distinction between third and fourth ages also marks the "the issue of ageing rather than the aged" and a "disjuncture between 'modern' and 'postmodernised' representations of age". GenX has the resources and motivation to exercise agency in delaying third age, using consumption to manage social status and progress (Mitchell *et al*., 2005). This makes GenX an especially interesting focus for marketers.

From segmentation to fragmentation....and back again?

Both Gurau (2012) and Montepare (2009) suggest consumers from the same generation can be sociologically diverse, weakening the appeal of CA as an actionable segmentation

variable. This more subjective/idiosyncratic approach acknowledges a shift from traditional objective/functional perspectives on age and aligns substantively with a postmodern take on consumption. In this view, through partnering with marketers, consumers are liberated to '(re)produce' themselves and their identity, and in so doing, move the focus for marketers from segmentation to 'fragmentation' (Firat and Shultz, 1997). Such fragmentation is often considered to denote targeting at the personal level, especially as technology has become both more advanced and more individualistically performative. Srivastasa *et al.* (2020), for example, show how consumers can be targeted independently, using filtering mechanisms to drive recommender systems that align consumers to wants they perhaps never knew they had. And even where individual data is sparse, they explain how machine learning can now be deployed to compensate by acquiring data on similar others. Belk (2020) also notes a conflation of spiralling technological know-how, and suggests that the heft of big data, the rising clamour of the crowd, the power of the influencer, and the ever-expanding reach of the algorithm may now question the relevance of segmentation.

Technology, though, can aid in understanding people collectively. Simmons (2008, p. 305) suggests, "The internet has emerged as the virtual glue, which many people in postmodern societies are using to bond together in an increasingly fragmented world", whilst Kozinets *et al*. (2022) discuss the rise of algorithmic branding, where computational processes are now used to 'sort and classify' people, their ideas, their conduct and their habits. Further, businesses have a finite range of products, even if that range is extensive and customisable at the micro-level, and there tend to be only a limited range of pricing, production and distribution propositions that allow for profitable trading (Baines, 2022). Actionable segmentation parameters that can inform design, market forecasting, and the development of

economically viable delivery systems, therefore remain a priority and, we suggest, connecting this to the postmodern, an imperative.

It is here that psychographic segmentation excels as a means of distilling consumer choice (Haustein *et al.*, 2018; Quach and Lee, 2021; Sudbury-Riley *et al.*, 2015). The notion of brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2005), and even counter-brand communities (Cova and White, 2010), suggest there are ways in which marketers can reach like-minded adherents via non-demographic intervention. There are also more fluid and ephemeral agglomerations of compatible individuals termed 'consumer tribes' (e.g. Cova *et al*., 2012) or 'consumption collectives' (Hawkins, 2018) who find 'linking value' (Cova and Cova, 2002) in a style, an idea, a value proposal, a behaviour, or a way of life. Both Coffin *et al.* (2023) and Molander *et al.* (2023) point to contemporary forces that might exacerbate heterogeneity, but note also that the collective urge remains, with groups re-coalescing as new forms of value emerge. And both consumption communities and consumption tribes remain, we argue, as segments; each partial to particular social media and sales platforms; amenable to especial marketing appeals; reachable by differently-purposed algorithms; and with their own specific relationships with the media. SPA will inevitably play to this more nuanced perspective, proving more useful in a postmodern world than either CA *or* generational distinction (Montepare, 2009).

Age as gendered experience

Age stereotypes carry implicit and explicit messages about a prevailing culture and it is suggested (e.g. Calasanti, 2008; Morelock *et al.*, 2017; Szmigin and Carrigan, 2002) that age is a gendered experience, governed via both social and cultural history (Sontag, 1972). For example, Hall (1922) suggested 'senescence', the fourth of five sequential life phases, would occur in man's early 40's *or before in women* (our italics), and others have argued that women

move from one age-related phase to another faster than men (Neugarten *et al*., 1965; Rossi, 1980). Stereotypes in language - for example 'old lady', 'old bride', and 'mumsy' - sustain perceptions of a hastened progression (Marcus *et al.,* 2019), and women - more than men - are also expected to conform to age-related (Neugarten 1973), sex-related (Hackathorn and Harvey, 2011) and body-shape (Gurrieri *et al*., 2013) norms. Such tropes gain salience as stigma in social discourse and are absorbed into self-concept from an early age (Katz and Calasanti, 2015). Women are thus believed to perceive higher levels of age-based stereotype threat (Lamont *et al.,* 2015; Manzi *et al.*, 2019) and discrimination (Cecil, 2022) than men, and possess more active perceptions of ageing (Sun *et al.,* 2017).

Sontag's (1972) seminal work on female ageing highlights also how maturing imposes especial social pressure on women. Female attractiveness is culturally associated with a youthful appearance (Sontag 1972; Lewis-Smith, 2014), and it is suggested (Birtwistle and Tsim, 2005; Szmigin and Carrigan, 2002) that women more keenly attempt to stave off age, or even deny age (Palmore, 2007), using cosmetic interventions (Reisenwitz and Fowler, 2018), 'beauty work' (Clarke and Griffin, 2008) and other age-resisting practices (Ballard *et al*., 2005; Harris, 1994; Pilcher and Martin, 2020) to give the appearance of ageing more 'positively' (Marshall, 2018). Mintel (2021), for example, recently reported that more than half of UK female consumers are 'stressed' about ageing skin and greying hair, and this, despite a clear and recent upshift in 'womenomics' (Matsui, 2019), a phenomenon evidenced by a burgeoning female ascendancy in both material wealth and occupational status. GenX women now represent 20% of Europe's female population (Eurostat, 2020) 50% or more of these aspiring to well-paid careers (Bresman and Rao, 2017). Women, though, still experience 'everyday sexism' (Bates, 2014), and – as suggested earlier - the experiences of ageing are now increasingly of relevance for GenX, and especially its women. This last

particularly in respect of the menopause, a stigmatised circumstance (e.g. Atkinson, *et al.*, 2021; Hardy *et al.*, 2018) now germane to women in this cohort, for whom a loss of both fertility and youthful 'looks' contribute to impending third age insecurities and reinforcing an especially female 'stigma consciousness' (Pinel, 1999). As Pilcher and Martin (2020, p. 699) concede, "the body is central to everyday life" – and equally a vital part of both our identity and our visibility.

For GenX women the conjunction of age and sexism represents a 'double jeopardy' (Barnett, 2008), a form of 'intersectional stigmatisation' (Turan *et al*., 2019) called 'gendered ageism' (Itzin and Phillipson, 2005). This might also be conceived as a 'dynamic stigma' (Cecil *et al.*, 2022) characterised in this case as the 'becoming' of a new stigma as age and gender converge (Golombisky, 2018). Here, intersectionality reflects age and gender as not merely conjunctional, but as 'mutually constitutive' (Meliou and Mallett, 2022) creating a "context of complex inequality" (McCall, 2005, p. 1795). Paradoxically, this results in a desire to be both more visible (as someone of worth) and coincidentally less visible (as a subject of derision) both potentially resulting in recourse to the market (Eikherdt and Luedicke, 2022; Pilcher and Martin, 2020). The study of GenX women, therefore, has both a mercantile and a social imperative. Further, although this article is not positioned as a feminist endeavour, we also acknowledge calls to continue exploring the interaction between consumption and women (e.g. Zayer and Pounders, 2022) more broadly.

Method

We adopt a systematic interpretivist research design (Spiggle, 1994) for understanding the meanings and experiences of SPA for a specific group of informants. This follows a broadly existential-phenomenological approach (Thompson, *et al.*, 1989) and combines elements of

the hermeneutic cycle (Thompson,1997) - that surfaces the meanings people attach to their lived experience through interpreting respondents' personal accounts of that experience - with the data structuring discipline of the Gioia (2012) method that provides a systematic process for iteratively synthesising qualitative data. We apply a hermeneutic lens to explore how age is experienced in everyday life, and how the settings and scenarios in which these experiences take place impact these experiences (Arnold and Fischer, 1994), and combine this with a coding schema that is informed by a derived understanding of the age-related marketing literature. A hermeneutic understanding also acknowledges reflexivity (Alvesson, 2003) whereby interpretation of a text is informed by the interpreters' own experience. This is key to our method, given the lead author herself is a GenX woman (see later under '*Analysis*').

There have been debates around the relative (and potentially incommensurable) merits of hermeneutics and the Gioia method (e.g. Mees-Buss *et al*., 2022), but we believe our blended design, that 1) uses a data structure within a largely hermeneutic process to both deploy and evidence our data-to-theory connections, and 2) uses diaries to overcome complaints that a data structure merely distils respondents' observations (usually from interviews) rather than representing their lived-experience (Silverman, 2022). Solicited Diary Research (SDR) was selected as apposite for capturing our data, as diaries "capture real-time information to explore concepts in studies applying hermeneutic phenomenology" (Ozuem *et al., 2*021, p.1446). See also Thomas *et al.* (2021) for a similar approach.

Solicited diary research

SDR provides "unique insights into the life-worlds inhabited by individuals" (Milligan and Bartlett, 2019 p. 1447) and helps distinguish respondent experiences and their trigger points (Mackrill, 2008). Although participants are responding to specified research objectives, diaries

provide an unstructured and non-directive means for capturing "rich insights into processes, relationships, and settings" (Patterson and Hogg, 2004, p.142) and, for our purposes, also capturing the 'narratives' of age (Biggs, 2004). These represent a context of enquiry where informants participate in both recording, and reflecting on, intrinsic cues (Bell, 1998). This involved context helps capture both insights and meanings ascribed to lived experience in natural, everyday, settings (Milligan *et al.,* 2005; Bolger *et al*., 2003). Diaries can surface events/issues that are personal and potentially delicate, thus difficult to capture using other elicitation means (e.g. interviews: Filep *et al*., 2018). Moreover, diary completion is a 'cathartic experience' (Meth, 2003, p.201) allowing for the recording of sensitivities which may otherwise remain latent.

Solicited diaries also provide participants with a means of self-expression (Elliott, 1997), empowering these concurrently to be both witness and informant, writing for themselves primarily, but also for a specific audience. Self-presentation theory suggests people may adopt, or accede to, particular behaviours (e.g. complete a solicited diary) to help create a preferred impression of themselves to others (Vohs *et al*., 2005); this usually motivated to "please the audience and to construct (create, maintain, and modify) one's public self-congruence to one's ideal" (Baumeister, 1982, p.3). Biggs (1999) notes that in creating individually-sited texts, narrators attend to both the 'vertical' (themselves) and also the 'horizontal' (the world around them). Solicited diaries provide opportunities for self-representation in the *act* of recording, but this may impact the potential for a faithful report. It is argued, however (Kenton, 2010), that this is no different to the self-censorship respondents deploy for other qualitative collection methods and that any self-representation that occurs can in itself provide an insight into the lived experience of the respondent.

It should be noted also, that SDR data is captured as a series of sequential personal accounts over time, surfacing events and experiences close to the time of occurrence, thus reducing memory and method biases and delivering benefits associated with immediate recall (Stone *et al.,* 2003). Any acts of self-representation, therefore are 'caught' in the reporting and not later manufactured to suit or impact some strategic agenda. SDR-related writing tasks have previously been used for exploring feelings about age - focussed either on gender (Kim and Yim, 2018), on context (Armenta, *et al.,* 2018), or on product consumption (Rioux and Mokounkolo, 2013). We use e(mail)-diaries (Jones and Woolly, 2015) for enhanced speed, surer data management, and accuracy (Thomas *et al.,* 2021).

As with other qualitative methods, this mode of research involves compromise (Smith *et al.,* 2003), and the *de facto* concession here is generalisability. The completion of e-diaries requires both writing and technology skills and intrinsically motivated participants. Mackrill (2008) suggests diarists are thus unlikely to be entirely representative of a chosen population and this should be accounted for when drawing conclusions. As with other research instruments, diary formats should be piloted (Thomas, *et al.*, 2021), and for this we recruited two GenX female colleagues to trial both method and instrument. We asked them to complete a diary over a period of three weeks (our intended diary duration), and their responses helped refine both diary format and guidance instructions for the study proper (see Appendix 1.). Our aim was to make this effective, but not confining (Jones and Woolley, 2015).

Sample

Our study is focused on GenX women residing in the United Kingdom (UK). Via convenience/snowballing sampling (Radcliffe, 2013), social media networks (Facebook, LinkedIn and Mumsnet) were used to publicise this participation opportunity and allowed also

for onward transmission of our message between peers. The use of social media to promote research participation is becoming more widespread (Gelinas, *et al.*, 2017; Benedict *et al.*, 2019) and, due to its speed, convenience and ubiquity, has already been used in recruitment for diary research (e.g. McCarthy, *et al.*, 2022). Such methods are deemed appropriate when a target population is distinctively defined (Kenten, 2010).

According to Statista (2022) Facebook is the preferred social media platform for those aged 46-55 in the UK, with 79% of that group registered users, and we surmised this wouldn't vary greatly for GenX generally. We inferred also that both LinkedIn and Mumsnet (likely, between them, to capture the full GenX age range) would be used by the more voluble members of this demographic and who might thus be especially amenable to diary solicitation. A small number of personal contacts were also encouraged to circulate posts amongst friends, also to help boost recruitment, a tactic recognised as useful by others in the field (Alaszewski, 2006; Jones and Woolley, 2015). Each post featured a dedicated weblink for acknowledging interest in our project.

The responding sample initially consisted of 483 women – all self-identifying as GenX. Both to confirm eligibility and obtain insight into respondents, we further set questions concerning date-of-birth, domestic and parental status and self-perceived identity. 125 women provided the detail required and, critically, also an email address allowing movement to the next stage of recruitment. After further contact just 35 participants completed an ethics consent form, so these became the selected sample. Small samples are typical/acceptable for SDR (Elliott, 1997; Saunders *et al.*, 2019) and similar studies (e.g. Kenten, 2010; Thorpe, 2018) have relied on sample sizes of 12 or less. We were consequently more than satisfied with our potential haul of 35, though were aware this may not be our final total.

Data Collection

The diaries, administered online, deployed an event-based design, with participants asked to reflect/report on their reactions to day-to-day incidents of age-related personal significance (Iida, *et al.*, 2012). Entries were completed over three weeks, emulating the duration used in other SDR studies (e.g. Vogel and Mitchell, 2017). Twenty-one days is considered adequate for eliciting reliable representations of lived experience; anything longer potentially resulting in boredom or response fatigue (Armenta *et al.*, 2018). Diarists were asked to return entries either daily or weekly (their preference) for review so we could keep track of development and raise points for clarification. Emailed weekly prompts allowed for personal contact with participants showing our continued interest in their endeavours (Thomas, et al., 2021). Well-motivated participants are more likely to provide good quality data (Mackrill, 2008).

Data Analysis Approach

Of the 24 diaries submitted 19 were considered adequate, the remainder evidencing either insufficient (entries for only one or two weeks) or incomplete/partial (sparse narrative) contribution. 18 of these emanated from our general call, whist just one derived from posts circulated by personal contacts. From these, we ultimately downloaded 254 diary entries, contained in 85 separate respondent-generated files, an average of 13 per respondent. These, comprising 35,000 words, were entered into NVivo for subsequent retrieval and management. Subsequent manual sifting, interpreting and synthesis of our data was inevitably reflexive (Alvesson, 2003). The lead researcher is a GenX woman who shares a 'tradition of experience' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2017) with respondents, and only the two female members of the research team analysed and interpreted diary entries. Reflexivity acknowledges and requires both involvement and detachment, an apparently paradoxical position that delivers a kind of self-awareness enabled 'truth'. Analysts were thus able to identify with, rather than objectify,

diarists and their narratives (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). Researcher reflexivity was thus key to our approach with interlocutors as 'positioned subjects' (Baxter and Eyles, 1997, p. 505) with a high level of contextual awareness.

First-order concepts and second-order themes

Initially, in accordance with a consumption-related hermeneutic cycle (e.g. Thompson, 1997) we looked to understand our diarists, both collectively and individually. This involved a preliminary analysis of each diarists contributions to determine both differences and similarities within the group and to get some sense of their collective background. However, unlike Thompson (1997) we are not concerned with diarists' *consumption* stories (and how these might be conditioned by cultural/historical context), but with diarists as putative *consumers* (and, how their personal histories might impact the way they perceive their age). As a second analytical phase, therefore we deployed the Gioia data structure approach (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Gioia *et al.,* 2012) to both synthesis and disaggregate the rich corpus of diarist views and opinions in the context of the age-related literature. This provided for both inductive and abductive coding via the application of a systematic process. We started by identifying micro-themes through open, inductive coding (Gioia *et al.,* 2012) capturing participant's metaphors and other rhetorical devices and paraphrasing direct quotes. These first-order 'concepts' (Gioia *et al.,* 2012) represented age-related thoughts, feelings and emotions triggered via participant-salient events. We identified 137 initial first-order concepts, and subsequently reviewed these (resolving any duplication/replication) until a final set of 57 respondent-led ideas emerged (see Table 1., column 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

First Order Concepts (Respondent-led)	**Second Order Themes** (Researcher-led): Literature informed = **bold** New = ***bold italics***	**Aggregate Dimensions** (Researcher-determined **Age Frames**)
'In my mind' age 'I feel' age 'Feeling my age'	**Feel Age** (Zee and Weiss; 2019; Amatulli *et al.,* 2018; Barak, 2009; Kastenbaum *et al.,* 1972)	**Affective Frame**
Today's age Both older and younger Not changed since my teens	**Age Fluidity** Cook, 2018 Gilleard and Higgs, 2014	
Life speeded up Future plans Time flies - sooner than we think	**Future Time Perspective** (Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2021; Kuppelwieser and Sarstedt, 2014)	
Don't conform to age expectations Age is just a number	**Ageless** (Kaufman, 1986; Gibbs, 2004; Twigg, 2018)	**Protest Frame**
Reject age categorisation Fake age	**Fabricated Age** (Guido *et al.,*2014)	
Ageing gracefully Reconciliation to change Increased confidence Don't lie about age	***Age Confident***	**Acceptance Frame**
Wrinkles/frown lines Body looks younger Mumsy Frumpy	**Look Age** (Kastenbaum *et al.,*1972; Guiot, 2001; Barak, 2009)	**Camouflage Frame**
Botox/hair colour hides age Use anti-aging products Make-up as age camouflage 'Fighting' age	**Age reversal** (Thorpe, 2018; Simmons, 2008)	
Hairdresser assumed I'd be grey You don't look it The youngest there In comparison - I'm not old	**Comparative age** (Kaufman and Elder, 2002)	
Work part-time Married Thinking about retirement	**Social age** (Rose, 1972; Neugarten, 1973; Elder, 1975; Moschis, 2000)	**Life-stage Frame**
Being with my parents Parent carer Roles: mother/daughter/grandmother Children age you	**Age is role-related** Moschis, 2012; Barrett and Montepare, 2015)	
Menopause Body beginning to wear out Hot flush Deterioration	**Biological Age** Jarvik (1975); Moschis (2000)	
Men 'vintage'; women 'age' Mutton dressed as lamb Grey hair brigade Old lady	**Age as gendered experience** (Thorpe, 2018; Marcus *et al.,*2019; Kornadt *et al.,* 2013)	**Inequity Frame**
Age is something to be feared Fed up with old jokes and jibes Cannot run as far Assumed technological Luddite	**Stereotype Age** (Zee and Weiss, 2019; Manzi *et al.,* 2019)	
Woman in her 40s The big 50 Age association images Age parlance, 'madam'	**Age ascription** (Thorpe, 2018; Barnhart and Peñaloza, L., 2013)	
Need reminding how old I am I forget my exact age – age amnesia Don't deliberately lie about my age Health more important than age	***Age not relevant***	**Inconsequence Frame**

Table 1. Data structure *Source: Derived from an interpretive analysis of this study's respondents' diary entries*

A further axial-coding stage involved grouping the first-order concepts by sense and correspondence into second-order 'themes' (Gioia *et al.*, 2012) using the age-related academic literature as a point of departure. Further adopting Thompson's (1997) hermeneutic approach we moved recursively back-and-forth between the first-order concepts, the literature, and our women's accounts of lived experience, discussing and re-visiting until we were able to consensually associate sets of first order codes to 13 themes relating either to extant constructs (see Figure 1) or other similarly associated age-related characterisations. Following this, eight first-order concepts remained unallocated, so in order to achieve data saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) we apportioned these to two 'new' themes, thus identifying ideas not previously expressed in the SPA literature, but still retaining thematic consistency (see Table 1., column 2). This subsequent process of second-order distillation moved the analysis from induction to abduction as respondent-led concepts give ground, ultimately, to more concrete researcher-led interpretations of a recognised, but ultimately incomplete, body of knowledge.

Aggregate dimensions

The third level of analysis in the Gioia method is used for developing 'aggregate dimensions'. This is achieved via an iterative process that involves cycling between the themes (Gioia *et al.*, 2012) to find commonalities that group these into a smaller set of coherent categories. Here, the analysis involved the full research team, both women and men. Developing a data structure using the Gioia method allows data synthesis to emerge from both a theoretical and phenomenological perspective (Gioia *et al.*,2012), and we scanned back-and-forth between first-order concepts, second-order themes and emerging aggregate dimensions until a consensus was reached on a final set of categories. Ultimately, we identified seven of these, with 14 themes collapsing into five aggregate dimensions, and two themes remaining without alteration, so also considered dimensions. Through this consensus we identified seven key

expressions/dimensions of GenX women's' lived, age-related, experience. These expressions/dimensions thus described a phenomenon – that is, the different ways in which age is subjectively construed by our GenX diarists.

We determined these aggregate dimensions might best be viewed as 'frames' (Goffman, 1974), objects emerging initially from Goffman's (1959) essay, *The presentation of self in everyday life* where, quoting William I. Thomas (p. 2), he suggests "we live by inference". That is, we both 'give' and 'give off' information, the one being raw data, but the other a communicated sense of how an actor wishes to be understood or perceived. We named these seven, 'Affective' frame, 'Protest' frame, 'Acceptance' frame and 'Camouflage', 'Life-stage', 'Inequity' and 'Inconsequence' frames (see Figure 1, column 3). Collectively, these denote an 'organisation of experience' (Goffman, 1974) from the GenX woman's point of view. Entman (1993, p.52) suggests, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation". Via an emergent research design we thus retrospectively co-opted Goffman's (1974) ideas to give 'voice' to our respondents' expressions of experience. Our synthesised respondent texts thus surface (or 'make salient', Entman, 1993) a range of enticed phenomena that emerge (O'Leary and Murphy, 2019) through iterative/reflexive textual evaluation, and "locate, perceive, identify and label" (Crook and Taylor, 1980, p. 241) frames that apply.

Findings

Our sample is described at Table 2 - each diarist is provided with a pseudonym (see column 1). They were chronologically aged between 41 and 55 (spanning almost the full GenX CA range) with a mean age of 48. Of the 19, 17 were employed and 2 were retired. Amongst those

employed, a range of job roles were recorded, largely - but not exclusively - either managerial or professional. Nine diarists were married, five were single, five divorced and 9 had children. Of the 17 that provided educational details, 13 were graduates and four were non-graduates. A social media-initiated study in the medical field recruiting also for e-diary completion reported 75% of diarists as graduate or equivalent (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022) an outcome not dissimilar to ours. Diarist identity sketches show how each recognised, and wished to project, their selves, and they took advantage of the free rein we gave them for self-expression (see Table 2, column 2). And whilst some did refer to CA, most focused on employment, family and personal interests or defined themselves through their life experiences, citing either concerns or satisfaction with their present situation.

Diarists contribute across and between our frames, and although we feel content analysis provides only limited insights for our study (for example, whilst Tamara saw her diary as an opportunity for effusion, Rebecca was sometimes 'stuck' for an entry, and contributions vary in size and in detail) we note that in our raw data, half our diarists contributed material that informed four or more frames. And for those frames for which we had the most corroborating data (Affective, Camouflage and Inequity frames) contributions were forthcoming from more than half of our diarists. This suggests diarists did not 'frame' age in a way that aligns exclusively with a single, stable, personal condition, but informed an initial awareness that both age identity and associated SPA - though individualised in themselves – are individualistically fluid (Zacher *et al.*, 2019).

Pseudonym	My Identity	Chronological Age	Employed	Job	Graduate	Marital status	Children
Kim	Active, mum of two, work part-time school hours, part of a large team, varied and interesting work. Always busy, enjoy keeping fit, being outdoors and socialising, positive outlook.	49	Employed	Logistics Coordinator	Yes	Married	Yes
Rosa	I'm 51, live with my partner & 2 of my 3 children. My parents are also currently living with us. I work full time in a manager role and feel like I have a lot of responsibilities at home and work. Also trying to lose weight and get fitter as I head towards the menopause	51	Employed	Registry Manager	Yes	Divorced	Yes
Teresa	I am a well-travelled 55-year-old, with a father from Norther Ireland and Anglo-American mother. I was brought up partially in Norway.	55	Retired	Ex-director	Yes	Married	No
Cheryl	Busy with career. Travels a lot. Feeling fit	45	Employed	Beautician	No	Single - never married	No
Sara	Have ME and fibromyalgia (15 1/2 years now) and haven't worked for that time. Supported by ex-husband with whom I still live as can't afford to move out and not entitled to go on council list unless he sells the flat Enjoy make up, karaoke, seeing my partner, tv, surveys and competitions	51	Retired	-	No	Divorced	No
Beth	A working lady who rides a motor scooter, knits, sews and loves being quirky	52	Employed	Purchasing / Author	No	Married	No
Rachel	I was a single mum for several years, who worked fulltime whilst studying in the evening at university to further my career. I now live with my daughter, my partner and his 3 children (14, 13 and 5 years). We are a busy family and very much enjoy home life and work.	46	Employed	Team Leader	Yes	Divorced	Yes
Hayley	I am a gentle type of person who is creative and artistic, I like to help others but also like to take care of myself to keep myself healthy and looking my best. I am peri-menopausal although with few side effects. Generally, I am a very happy person and I like to see the best in people.	46	Employed	Administrator	No	Divorced	No
Diana	I am a very active person and run 30-50 miles a week. I like to feel that I am not average for my age. I found turning 40 very difficult an but now I am at peace as people tend to think I am younger than I am. I often forget how old I am. Not sure how happy I will be to turn 50 though. My kids are still relatively young, 12 and 14, and that makes me feel young.	46	Employed	Manager	Yes	Married	Yes
Tina	I work full time, have a partner, and have two rapidly growing children. Having children makes me very aware of my own age. I run several times a week.	49	Employed	Reward Manager	Yes	Divorced	Yes
Anastasia	I am a 53-year-old married lady. My older siblings are 65, 64, 61 this year. My dad and mum died 6 and 3 years ago, and I miss them every day. I don't have any children of my own, but I have 2 stepchildren, aged 30 and 19. I recently got married for the 4th and hopefully last time.	53	Employed	Lecturer	Yes	Married	No
Rebecca	I am happily married with one son at University with both parents alive. I'm a relatively fit, positive, glass half full person who tries to see the best in things and people. I have a lot of friends in different friendship groups that I see regularly, and I tend to be the organiser of get togethers. I like being with people generally and would say I'm a sunny person.	48	Employed	CRM Manager	Yes	Married	No
Tamara	I am a personal assistant and a singer in two bands, I love music, food and guinea pigs (I have two) and am getting married in 2022	41	Employed	Personal Assistant	Yes	Single - never married	No

Anna	Friendly. Honest. hard working	54	Employed	Not supplied	Not supplied	Single - never married	No
Ruth	I am a daughter to parents who have been married for 47 years. I have two younger sisters and two cousins who I consider older brothers. I grew up in Leicester until I was 10 years old and then moved to the countryside - bit of a culture shock. I am someone who counts their blessings, practices gratitude, and tries to have a positive and hopeful outlook.	44	Employed	Life Coach	Yes	Single - never married	No
Joanna	I'm an academic researcher, a mother, a wife, a daughter, a runner, and I like books and listening to music.	46	Employed	Academic Researcher	Yes	Married	Yes
Eve	I am 43 years old. A mix of being freelance and working as a tutor for undergraduates and postgraduates. I have a teenage son due to start year 10 in September and been married to for nearly 17 years. I have an active and healthy lifestyle and overall am happy with my lot in life :-)	43	Employed	Marketing Consultant	Yes	Married	Yes
Yasmin	I identify as being in my 40's all be the very last smudge of the 40's. I found myself constantly looking back, pulling through old memories. I notice my habits and manners are of another era! I'm officially an old fart. I'm now proud to tell people I will be 50 in October	49	Employed	Business Owner	Not supplied	Single - never married	Yes
Hannah	I am a mum and research scientist working in a university. I love my job but find it difficult to carve out time for self-care.	45	Employed	Professor	Yes	Married	Yes

Table 2. Participant details

Source: Data supplied by this study's research participants (diarists) and subsequently anonymised

Immediately below we explore the seven frames detailed in Table 1, illustrating key points with quotations from our diaries and relating these both to the lived experiences of our respondents and to the age-related theory we introduced in our literature review. Subsequently, in our *Theoretical Contribution*, we advance our analysis further by summarising our frame structure and commenting on this in the context of stigma, an issue we interpret to be of especial relevance for this generational cohort.

Affective Frame

This frame resonates strongly with 'Feel Age' (e.g. Kastenbaum *et al.*,1972; Zee and Weiss, 2019). Here, age is an 'imaginary', personally constructed via self-reflection on past and present events, and on future opportunities (Kaufmann, 1981: Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2021). It is consequently framed **Affective**ly as an attitude and/or emotion rather than a physical condition or chronological benchmark; and this is how women may create their preferred self, disassociating how they might 'feel' physically; how they might 'look'; or how their CA might suggest they behave, with how they experience age as sentiment. For example, Rachel (46) reflects on the impending enormity of her 50th birthday, but demonstrates also how – from a SPA perspective - her 'heart' might overrule her 'head'.

> I suppose I do not feel my age and that makes it worse when I have to think about my age. It is not that I am afraid to say what my age is and never have been. Fifty is a big, huge number and life seems to have speeded up. It seems like yesterday I was turning 40, and before that 30 and before that 21. I don't think I have changed much in the time and would say I am young at heart. (Rachel, 46)

This perspective loomed large in the accounts of our diarists, mostly - though not exclusively – affecting an age younger than both CA and how they 'felt' physically, with diarists exercising a cognitive volition (Marshall, 2018) regarding SPA. This feeling of relative youth might be engendered by satisfaction with personal accomplishment, contrasting potential disappointments associated with advancing CA (Lamont *et al.,* 2015) with their own experiences of 'successful ageing' (Katz and Calasanti, 2015). Often, difference between heart and head might be reinforced, or even caused, by either associating with the young and speaking their 'language' (finding issues of common interest, bonding over technology - where the distance between them and those younger is closed), or alternatively by socialising with those older, either to confirm and/or emotionally extend the distance between them. Hayley (46) explained how she had been speaking with her 15 year-old nephew and his girlfriend, who were "laughing at my silly comments – the connection made me feel about 25" before later recounting a more comprehensive strategy.

> I spoke to a friend my age today, she was talking about the menopause and her experience as we are both going through it. It made me feel my age, I was neither happy or sad about feeling my age but I have started to realise that talking to much older people and much younger people actually makes me feel and act younger. I don't know why that is.

This paradoxical juxtaposition of affective SPA was not unusual, and 'feel' could change according to events. "Doing grown up stuff" (Ruth, 44), for example - discussing life and critical illness insurance, Teresa (55); or considering the potential loss of a sibling: Rachel (46) - resonated with *increasing* CA, whilst acting 'irresponsibly' (partying, dancing, eating pizza and generally having 'fun' – reinforced youth.

Some respondents told how they deployed resources to help create or sustain an illusory CA – going to the gym, riding a motorcycle, driving an age-inappropriate car, dressing well or

doing something they believed typical of those younger. For example, Kim (49) - a mum of two primary school children - reflected on cycling well into her late 40s ("I'm probably as fit as I've ever been which does make me feel younger"), whilst Beth revealed her modus operandi for thwarting CA: "Things like writing, riding my scooter, driving fast cars and just not being the boring middle-aged women people see, makes me feel younger and I like that. Today is a day of feeling younger than my age." And she continued, referring to her passion for her 125cc scooter, "Today is a riding day. Riding my bike is one of the things that give me great joy and also make me feel like a much younger person." By contrast, evidence suggested that feeling stressed could lead to 'feeling' older than CA, and Rachel (46), Hannah (45), and Beth (52), all spoke of the mental impact of doing 'too much'.

Nostalgia performed a similar mediating role, for some accentuating difference between themselves and a fellow reminiscer, but for others closing distance to those they were reminiscing with. And music, either as a conduit to imagined hedonism or a reminder of youth passed, might also impact age as experienced attitudinally/emotionally. Some noted, thus, how 'time flies' (Kuppelweiser and Klaus, 2021), demonstrating that age self-identification is an ongoing process (Kaufmann, 1981), a continuous personal assessment viewed in relation to multiple age categories and diverse triggers (Nikander, 2009). This appears to create a fluid age identity (Cook, 2018; Gilleard and Higgs, 2014) traversing between younger and older selves – a "transient temporal dimension influenced by fleeting, everyday experiences" (Barrett and Montepare, 2015, p. 56).

Inconsequence Frame

In their identity sketches (see Table 2) only six of the nineteen diarists mentioned age directly, and only four led with it (e.g. Rosa – "I'm 51…"; Anastasia - "I am a 53 year-old married

lady…"). For most, CA appeared not salient to how they wished to self-represent. Some of our diarists made clear that they did not "attend to or possess an awareness of their age" (Montepare, 2009, p. 45) and we thus recognise that **Inconsequence** can be relevant to the broader framing of age-identity. Hannah (45), a research scientist working in a university - and likely associating frequently with others much younger than her – said this:

> I often forget my exact age in years so tend to state I am in my forties so I don't have to pause and work it out. I suspect I will soon switch to the term 'nearly 50' so my avoidance of stating my exact age is not about trying to avoid admitting exactly how old I am. (Hannah, 45)

Whilst Rebecca, a CRM manager who – as we'll see later under the Inequity Frame admitted readily of her 'motherly' status at work - was keen to point out when starting her diary:

> When I had my first covid vaccination I had a discussion with the person taking my details as she said my DoB and told me how old this made me ….. this is not through wishful thinking but a sincerity that I honestly thought I was younger than she was telling me I was! (Rebecca, 48).

It's interesting to note here that Rebecca is surprised that she should be 'told' her age through narration of her CA, evidence that SPA and CA are not axiomatically synonymous. This concurs with studies suggesting that for some, CA has limited relevance to self-concept (Ward, 1984; Kaufman, 1986) and this was summed up by Hannah (45) reflecting on her most recent birthday:

> I reached 45 on my last birthday and must confess I didn't really think about it much other than mild surprise that I had reached an age that, when I was younger seemed really old, and now that I had reached it, didn't seem old at all – it seemed the same as tens of years before (other than now having 2 kids and a monster job!).

Hannah further suggests that keeping the diary had caused her to, "R**e**alise how much I think about my size, weight and fitness, in contrast to my age, which never features in my thoughts". She did later, though, confess to a hip problem and a 'dread' of the menopause, so although age*ing* appeared to be of consequence, 'age' (or CA) was not, and a semiotic relationship between the two was not easily acknowledged.

We noted also, though, that an apparent disregard of CA may act also as a form of self-protection: a strategy – again perhaps unconscious – used to defend against the scrutiny and stereotyping linked with CA (Amatulli *et al*., 2018). By repudiating CA we believe some diarists were effectively denying that CA has licence, drawing both a semiotic *and* a lexical distinction between the two. Cheryl (45), for example, a beautician who perhaps profits from others more readily acknowledging their age, perhaps finds CA to be a personal threat that aligns her more closely with her 'older' customers.

> I did not celebrate my birthday with anyone. The date was just an annotation in my diary. Neither good nor bad. I have not celebrated my birthday for decades. Probably my early 20's. I do not usually act any differently from a normal day. I do not even mention my birthday. It is usually my co-worker who want to mark my birthday. For some reasons, I always feel embarrassed about it. (Cheryl, 45)

Amongst her customers may be those for whom CA is inconsequential because it can be 'concealed' (Cecil *et al*., 2022), but for Cheryl we believe the threat is more existential – a direct hit to her identity and sense of self. So whereas the recasting discussed in the context of the Affective Frame was achieved consciously, for the Inconsequence Frame the adjustment is perhaps habituated rather than reflective. Here, SPA is not represented by a number, but rather by events, conditions or comparisons that impact more definitively on framing (Montepare 2009) – see also Life Stage Frame, later.

Acceptance Frame

The framing of age as 'inconsequential' implies CA as irrelevant, but for others it did assume significance though was not perceived as harmful. Inconsequence we attribute to an avowed (if not always authentic) disinterest in age, whilst for some CA was central to their identity. Some diary entries focused predominantly on CA, acknowledging this as either inescapable and/or useful, something to be either endured, accommodated or even cherished, but under any circumstances to be **Accepted**. Diary entries suggested the process of maturing had led some to a 'cognitive re-appraisal' of expectations (Lewis-Smith, 2014), and to the conclusion that CA, after all, is perhaps, only a number – neither to be feared nor denied. Kim (49), for example – a self-identified 'older mum' – found succour in the companionship of similarly aged friends:

> We don't really bother about what other people think or what we look like, it has always been like this but probably even more so as we get older and make fun of ourselves and each other, it's really relaxing and it's a tonic spending time with them…I like finding out what they have been up to, but I wouldn't want to be sleeping on a yoga mat after drinking 2 litres of mango cider, whatever even that is!! (Kim, 49)

Gaining surety of self and of one's identity was deemed necessary for positive self-appraisal, with Tina (49) suggesting: "I'm looking forward to my 50^{th,} if I am healthy. As you get older you gain confidence and accept yourself more."

Rather than been daunted by 'the big 50' Tina appeared to relish the future, perhaps because – following a prior divorce - she had now 'settled in' with a new partner, and Mirowsky and Ross (1999) suggest relational stability helps mitigate age-related concerns. SPA here (as equal to CA) was thus seen more as an opportunity for renewal and/or reinvention (Kaufman, 1986)

than something just to accede to. Other diarists, such as Yasmin (also 49) reported contentment, and even pride, in their maturity because they perceived they had aged well (Katz and Calasanti, 2015), and for her the self-professed soubriquet 'old fart' was a badge of honour. Marshall (2018) notes how burgeoning midlife may be viewed by some as a 'field of aspiration', holding out the promise of possibilities and agency for those with appropriate confidence and resources.

For some, though, the focus for successful ageing was neither on what had been achieved nor what might be achieved but, rather, on how they 'looked'. Teresa (55), who had stayed "slim and in shape" (primarily, she believed, through not having children), had travelled extensively and accrued substantial wealth, focused on her appearance:

> I am not shy about telling people my age, I don't feel ashamed of it, and usually when I tell people my age I get a nice compliment about looking young which I'll always take! I don't mind people knowing I've been on earth a bit longer than they have! So I am always honest and tell my age. (Teresa, 55)

Had nature, or perhaps 'body work' (Pilcher and Martin, 2021) – see Camouflage Frame, later – not led Teresa to believe she had aged successfully, then acceptance might not have been so easily acquired. By contrast, Hayley (46) – recently divorced and with no relational anchor - will also take a complement if offered, but for her there appeared to be jeopardy, not lost opportunity, in withholding CA. She feared that shielding her true age from others might result in harmful comparison, and acceptance for her seems more a guard against prejudicial misrepresentation than a display of confidence:

> My last birthday was only a few days ago, I turned 46…If someone asks me my age I tell them the truth, I see no point in lying about it, I would rather people knew my age

and thought I looked good for it than pretend to be younger and have people think 'she isn't ageing well'.

In some cases, though, acceptance represented neither strategic nor protective response to the process of ageing. Diana (46), for example, explained that "Although I found turning 40 very hard, I guess I have got used to it", and in so doing expressed a sense of inevitability, or perhaps of a reluctant, grudging, acceptance – perhaps that there is no point in striving for a younger SPA. Resignation to the lived reality of CA perhaps represents for some a preparation – perhaps subconsciously - for approaching third age (Laslett, 1987), an acknowledgement that makes the transition from mere adulthood to maturity less of a struggle. But passivity - also a characteristic of both Affective and Inconsequence frames – was not relevant for all our frames, and others resonated more as a call to action

Camouflage Frame

It's apparent from accounts reported in preceding frames that respondents recognise a close relationship between identity, CA, SPA and the body that both they and others see. Kastenbaum *et al*. (1972) draw on this relationship to underpin the phenomenon they label 'look age' (see also, Guiot, 2001; Barak, 2009), a subjective gerontological condition focused upon appearance. Some diarists explained they had always 'looked' young for their age (Tamara [41], for example, reminisced about being asked for proof of age identity despite her legal CA) and some maintained they had retained this same temporal/bodily advantage into their middle years. Others (a substantial number) were surprised and/or saddened at the image facing them in the mirror**,** reflecting on wrinkles, tired eyes, and both weight gain and weight loss, as indicators of 'looks' dispersed across intervening years. The quotation below suggests how

peer comparison, the mirror, and perceived social pressure might collectively initiate the temptation take evasive action:

> … my sister is 2 years older than me and has just had Botox. I am really upset she has had it, partly because I think it is dangerous but also because we look similar and if she thinks she needs it then she must think I look bad and need it too. I feel under pressure and have started researching alternatives. I can't stop looking in the mirror and wondering how bad I look. I felt every one of my 46 years today. (Hayley, 46)

Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) suggest physical ageing is effectively a 'front' that frustrates the postmodern appetite for being the age one wants to be (Ideal age, Barak, 2009) where – as Biggs (1997, p. 556) observes - there might be "a youthful self, trapped inside an ageing mask" (see Affective Frame). Pilcher and Martin (2020, p. 699/700) remind us, "The body is central to everyday life" something that is with us "always and everywhere". Consequently, as evidenced in Hayley's quote further above, we noted that diarists not only reflected on the identity/look/age conjunction, but also how this could be disturbed, or how unwanted appearances might be '**Camouflaged**' to blend in with those younger.

Ageing without *appearing* to age was one of a number of characteristics associated with successful ageing, and some diarists reported on their capacity for practicing 'age-resisting activities' (Ballard, *et al.*, 2005). Relevant accounts told of attempts to manipulate appearance to match a desired CA, "exercising agency by actively refashioning their look" (Goulding and Shankar, 2004, p. 641), postponing visible signs of ageing (Pilcher and Martin, 2020) looking, even, to reverse age (Thorpe, 2018). This 'refashioning' could take different forms, with a particular focus on key ageing cyphers - wrinkles and greying hair. Eve (43), who deemed age inconsequential because its façade could be addressed, admitted: "Ageing in terms of looks does not concern me – Botox and hair colour can hopefully see me through", and Rosa (51)

mirrored Eve's intentions: "Went to the hairdressers, went a couple of shades lighter to lessen the impact of the grey roots coming through. I suggested to my family that I'm thinking about Botox."

Our findings reflect prior studies (e.g. Barrett and Montepare, 2015 p.57; Amatulli *et al.,* 2015; Rubin and Berntsen, 2006) suggesting female consumers past their mid-thirties may aspire to a younger age identity and can achieve this by appropriating the paraphernalia of 'eternal youth' - cosmetics and fashionable clothes, for example - that might serve to obscure CA. And for some, the consequences of not deploying camouflage might be dire.

> Walked out of the house without make up on to take my daughter to school, caught sight of my reflection in a car window and thought "!@X!!X!, I look really old!" Didn't put any make up on for the rest of the day and kept thinking the same thing every time I saw my reflection (Joanna, 46)

Divorcee Hayley (46) spent an afternoon trying on clothes in the 'unforgiving' and 'harsh lights' of the changing rooms: "I felt I looked nice in the clothes and youthful, maybe 30, but without my clothes I felt I looked older, closer to my real age… It wasn't a great experience really!" She continued, though: "I left thinking I must do more exercise to keep my body looking young. I searched on the internet for more exercises to do and actually did them". Biggs (1997, p. 566) observes that in postmodernity people may resort to "the deceptive use of social masking" - concealing, or camouflaging, the mask of ageing with another mask that they prefer. And exercise – cycling and running especially - represented a perhaps more socially 'acceptable' masking technique that Kim (49), Rosa (51), Diana (46), Tina (49) - and Joanna and Hayley – all set as key indicators in their biography sketches. Diana leads with: "I am a very active person and run 30-50 miles a week!", suggesting this is the persona she is keen to project. Camouflage can thus be appropriated in many ways, not just by recourse to the market.

Protest Frame

As identified above, Biggs (1997) took Featherstone and Hepworth's (1991) original 'mask' analogy, and stretched this to accommodate 'social' (or purposeful) re-masking, which he acknowledged also as a 'cry of protest'. It has been said that GenX are more likely than earlier generations to discount conventional expectations of identity, not least in the context of age (Givskov and Deuze, 2018), and acts/thoughts of resistance – even if not material – were evident in our diaries. Teresa (55) argued that GenX might be the first to challenge the social *status quo*: "Our generation are not needed to conform to age and gender related roles like my parents." She had purposely remained child-free, and both her and her husband were planning to retire early and travel the world. Beth (52) – self-admittedly 'rebellious' on occasion - was also looking towards early retirement, similarly as an opportunity to thwart rather than submit to age, and asserting she was not yet ready "to go into the night".

Whilst some clearly believed that either 'affecting' a younger age, 'buying' a younger age at the beautician, or extending active life beyond retirement were valid signs of protest, others deliberately 'fabricated' a younger age (Guido *et al.,* 2014) purposely to deceive. Palmore (2007) observed that women may often lie about CA because this is a cypher for negative age stereotypes, but this was focused primarily on anxieties regarding fertility or physical attractiveness. Diana (46) admitted to self-presenting as younger by "airbrushing my wrinkles" on photos, and this could readily be associated with similar concerns. For others, though, being age-deceptive was more a reaction against negative gendered/ageist assumptions. Beth had taken a degree in psychology in her 40s, and felt this keenly:

> I had a survey emailed to me just now. Pains me when your age is a factor. I do often change the data as I don't really like admitting my age, as if my age makes my opinions

less worthy or something. (which is what happened - got so far, added my range of age 50-54, and 'boom!', after 30 questions - sorry you don't meet our criteria).

Other entries demonstrated how it might be legitimate to either fake, or omit to record, age to obtain equal opportunity and diarists generally demonstrated a fierce objection to being normalised as a CA-represented entity; especially, again, where that meant being judged 'past it'. Tamara (41), looking ponderously into the future and standing up fiercely for all GenXers (coincidentally exhibiting some of the angst we address later in the Inequity Frame) observed:

> There's a big difference between a 45 year old and a 75 year old but somehow they are grouped into the over 45 age range (or born before 1976) - basically the over the hill category! It's almost as if you don't matter anymore if you are over 45! You are just categorised as old.

There was a sense also 'acting ones age' was no longer necessary, nor conforming to stereotypical presumptions of what a woman in her middle years might think, do, or look. Rather, some suggested they could 'act as they wished' with no pre-assigned conventions. Morelock *et al.* (2017 p. 20) suggests that re-addressing age-identity may involve 'unwriting', rather than 'rewriting', age and in our study, we found participants who viewed CA as ephemeral, and considered themselves neither constrained by (Twigg, 2018), nor 'beyond' (Kaufman, 1986) their CA. Their entries suggested a normalised gerontological biography did not reflect *their* lived experiences of ageing (Cook, 2018), and Teresa (55) complained, "Rather than identifying with a specific generation or age group, I would like to think I have many qualities that could be seen as ageless."

Respondents were thus rejecting a culturally imposed age (Amatulli *et al.*, 2018), allowing them to "efface, remove or de-centre" CA (Twigg, 2018, p. 346). For example, Sara (51), who follows British Beauty Blogger (Jane Cunningham) – an 'older' woman subscribing to a 'do what you want' philosophy – gave this account of a visit she made to a carvery:

> She [the waitress] said she'd love to wear something similar [skirt] but couldn't at her age. I said that age is just a number and although I'm what might be considered middle aged or older, I felt fine wearing my skirt..... I told her that she could too, forget the number and dress how you want. (Sara, 51).

So this frame, as with the Camouflage frame, provides evidence also of a 'fighting back' against the incumbrances of CA, but it does not advocate physical re-configuration. And even though wearing a short skirt could be construed as social masking, it can also be a seen as protest against ageist norms. Thus, as with the Inconsequence frame, combat here is manifest as a dismissal of normative expectations and an embrace of non-conformance, and . though diarists accounts evidenced just minor acts of rebellion, these evidenced a moving on from prior generations - but, in so doing, eliminating the need for a new, or revised, norm.

Inequity Frame

The literature (e.g. Barnett, 2008; Golombisky, 2018) suggests that gendered ageing is a double jeopardy, an intersectional condition that is compound rather than additive (Meliou and Mallett, 2022) – and at odds with an emerging 'womenomics' (Matsui, 2019) that evidences an upsurge in the life chances of independent women. Things are changing - but not quickly enough - and our respondents felt keenly the weight of **Inequities** (inequalities, unfairness, bias) implying they were comparatively of less value, either than men of all ages and/or other women younger than they. Levy's (2009) embodiment theory suggests women are motivated to believe a younger age-identity leads to more socially acceptable status; this deriving from normatively

constructed asymmetries (Sontag, 1972) concerning female versus male ageing: “Men grow old and become vintage, but I feel that as woman, we just get old…” (Anna, 54)

This double jeopardy is manifest in our womens’ daily accounts as both female age stereotyping (e.g. Thorpe, 2018; Zee and Weiss, 2019) and associated gendered ageism (Itzin and Phillipson, 2005; Calasanti, 2008; Voss *et al*., 2018). Sara (51) gave voice to these blended concerns, demonstrating how she felt age and female identity were inextricably linked, perhaps only half-joking, “I associate old age with being 50. When I think about what an average 50-year-old is, I imagine a generic chubby woman with rubbish hair in a cardigan!”. Tamara (41), mirrored these same concerns, noting how others’ perceptions might be biased against her:

> As a singer, I feel I need to look quite ‘cool’, however my age does come into play when deciding what to wear. I worry people will comment on how I look, which sadly does happen a lot as a female singer… I want to wear a crop top but I feel like it isn’t age appropriate for someone over 40!

Our diarists noted, thus, two different forms of double standard (Harris, 1994) – one suggesting ageing is perceived qualitatively differently for women, but also that countering this via age concealment/camouflaging tends also to be judged harshly, perhaps viewed as an attempt to diminish ‘discreditable attributes’ (Goffman, 1963) - “I would hate for people to laugh at me or talk about me and say I was dressing too young.”, grumbled Diana (46) . That they were trapped between being devalued as an ‘older’ woman, and being devalued coincidentally when looking to address this was a concern.

Work loomed large in some women’s accounts, along with the suspicion that as they aged they might be deemed less able to cope with the ‘difficulties’ of an evolving environment. Diana (46) complained she had, “…found examples where I believe that being female and being in

an older demographic has led to technology being 'mansplained' to me." Marcus *et al.* (2019) suggest that, especially if successful, ageing women in work might be discredited as members of a less desirable 'outgroup' rather than equal, or even senior, members of the team. Rebecca (48) explained how - although she claims not to act her age - she perceived herself as 'mum of the team' at work. Paradoxically, though, this may have given her additional (though perhaps unlooked for) status, and Sara (51) reflected – albeit somewhat sceptically - on a colleague who believed her 'trademark' grey streak was seen by men as a mark of trusted experience. In none of these cases, though - even where age might appear to afford some benefit - was workplace acknowledgement unconditional. And the mere fact of being either a woman and/or an ageing woman required either especial validation or compliance to stereotypical expectations, with age a 'condition' ascribed by others (Barnhart and Peñaloza, 2013; Thorpe 2018).

This sense of inequity applied not only in comparison to men, but also to other women, where observations focused on either those younger than themselves, or on a hoped-for distance from those older. In the Acceptance Frame, we noted how associating with older people might be deemed useful for reinforcing cherished difference, but the perceived inevitability of ultimately evolving from 'ageing' to 'old' was also considered unfair. Diana (46) further lamented, "Is there a day when you have to start dressing like your mum?", and Rachel (also 46) was equally despairing:

> Hello diary, what a day today! No internet connection, the whole postcode had gone down, according to the young man on the end of the phone, suddenly sounded like my mum with the thought of "is he old enough to have left school?" Oh my! I am becoming my mum more and more, is this an age thing??

Again, this invoked the spectre of the stereotype, a moveable feast that appeared to follow from one articulation of the ageing woman to another. And though it has been suggested (Zee and

Weiss, 2019: Rosenthal *et al.,* 2021) that those in middle years, especially, look to distance themselves from stereotype, Thorpe (2018) notes, that purposely 'stepping' from one age category to another (see Camouflage Frame) may just re-configure the trope, and that a desire to disassociate from others is a stereotype in itself - and how unfair is that?

Life Stage Frame

We found evidence that respondents not only recognised stereotypical expectations to which they should conform, but acknowledged pre-ordained roles or personal events (either socially constructed or biologically accrued: Meliou and Mallett, 2022; Moschis, 2012) that were made manifest as signposts in the female existence. Age viewed primarily as a social construct (Rose, 1972; Neugarten, 1973) gives rise to the 'life course' perspective (Barrett and Montepare, 2015) in which family roles (such as wife, sibling or carer of parents); career stages (including promotion and retirement); and reproductive-related events (becoming a mother, the menopause) assume precedence in narratives of SPA. These are largely culturally/socially embedded but we extend this also to cover other age-related events. Illness, for example, contributes to age understood as biological (Moschis, 2000) or psychobiological (Jarvik, 1975), and leads thus to our preferred use of the term **Life Stage** (e.g. Mathur and Moschis, 2005) frame.

GenX women are now of an age where they may either be mentoring/managing growing children or caring for parents. Our diaries suggested children could be either rejuvenating or age-inducing (as women succumbed to exhaustion or stress) but significant in SPA. The alternative and/or added burden of taking responsibility for elderly parents was also perceived as ageing, but either way – as noted already for the Affective Frame – it was not unusual for women under duress to feel older than CA (Rossi, 1980). Thus, as the years passed, triggers

might themselves also be age-related. Hayley (46), now temporarily living back home after divorce, noted the anxieties inherent in caring for an octogenerian parent: "My dad who I am now living with was very poorly today…Having to take responsibility for what could have been a life-or-death decision made me feel and act my age…I felt about 55."

Even those diarists not otherwise feeling bound to CA explained how they were jolted into CA-awareness by events causing them to re-assess and re-negotiate their identity, as either theirs – or significant others' - bodily concerns emerged as central to their identity (Pilcher and Martin, 2021). For example, menopause emerges as a pivotal event for those of a 'certain', GenX-related, age (Atkinson, *et al.,* 2021; Hardy *et al.,* 2018):

> I spoke to a friend my age today; she was talking about the menopause and her experience as we are both going through it. 50 rhymes with the dreaded menopause. End of period and fertility. My body is telling me one of its biological functions is over. (Teresa, 55)

The threat of perceived physical depreciation was also found to throw otherwise joyful life events into relief. We refer again to Tamara (41). In one diary account she explained how her assumed status as happy 'bride-to-be' was compromised through both gender and peer comparison, both of which (see Inequity Frame earlier) threatened to spoil her wedding day. This was not to be a normal life stage event, but one that conceded to expectations of how a bride should look. Reading Jo Brand's 'Born Lippy' had caused her to reflect how, as the day approached, she was feeling under pressure:

> I am getting married next year and I don't want to look like an old bride, especially as my fiancé is 8 years younger than me (33), and most of his friends' partners are in their late 20's. It's really important to me that I feel I look young on my special day. (Tamara, 41).

Her sentiments coincide with prior findings (e.g. Armenta *et al.,* 2018; Robertson and Weiss, 2018) suggesting that for consumers (of either services, goods or experiences) SPA is frequently a function of context or contingency and for some this may be conditioned by life-stage events. According to Gullette (2015, p. 11) our narratives are "permeated by the preexisting inventions of culture" and our SPA may be a reaction to others' (or perceived others') life stage assumptions.

For some, though, life stage was not so much governed by culture as it was by natural decline. Physical or mental deterioration, for example, rather than status depreciation (e.g. the menopause, widowhood) was noted also as a temporal marker, and a number of diarists referred to 'aches and pains' or age-related disease as somehow beating the march of time: "Just diverticulosis. An age thing ... Bugger... Had a good ole giggle with the staff when they said, "*you get them with age*". Hmm….." (Anastasia, 53, after visiting the hospital). Here, as we again noted in the Affective Frame, SPA may be experienced as older than CA - a reaction, rather than aspiration, to be accommodated. For example, Sara – who was cited in previous frame narratives and emerges as a feisty woman with a spirited disregard for stereotypes – reflects on her illnesses, and after one especially tough day demonstrated how she could 'be' numerous ages at once. And this exemplifies her as typical of our GenX women – ageing, but difficult, age-wise, to pin down:

> I feel about in my 30s, still young enough to do things - but with some maturity - but having ME and fibromyalgia and having to use a walking stick and wheelchair, I can sometimes feel about 90 when I'm too creaky or in pain to do much. (Sara, 51)

Discussion

Overall, we noted that although our GenX cohort was relatively *extrinsically* homogeneous (limited age range, mostly well-educated with salaried jobs, amenable to solicitations for diary completion) it was also *intrinsically* heterogeneous. Compare Yasmin, for example – in her late forties and identifying happily as 'old' – with Diana, 46, who clearly remains 'young at heart'. Compare, also, Sara – making the best of her constrained life-chances – with Tina, who works full-time and runs to keep young. And finally compare Tamara, whose life is full of possibility, with Rosa who is 10 years older and now feels family responsibilities weighing heavily upon her shoulders. And in the same way that they *present* heterogeneously, we note also the diverse ways in which they construe age; both via a reaction to the possibilities and barriers that help structure their lives but also through the events that prompt their diary entries.

Our research makes contributions on several fronts, addressing a combination of issues that are important both for marketing theory and practice, and for how society at large perceives how marketers behave and how GenX women are understood. These issues are age, gender, stigma and consumer targeting. We also contribute methodologically, providing a reflexive/hermeneutic insight into how these interact, and adding further support for using solicited diary research.

Theoretical implications

Our first contribution is to describe the phenomenon of ageing as perceived by a commercially and socially significant demographic category, the GenX woman. We use a series of seven 'frames' (Goffman, 1974) to reveal the complexity inherent in this group's collective, age-related, mindset. Although researchers and practitioners in many areas (e.g. healthcare, sociology, marketing) increasingly recognise the relevance of SPA this is, as far as we are aware, the first study to take this tightly defined cohort of marketing interest as they approach

'third age' (Laslett, 1987), and to deconstruct this using respondents' largely undirected evidence. We discuss the theoretical implications of our research using the headings, *Marketing*, *Masquerade* and *Method* immediately below.

Marketing

In constructing our frames we work from induction, to abduction, and then back to induction. Our frames are considered to apply neither exclusively nor selectively, but as an 'ages system', intersecting and overlapping – sometimes coinciding - and perhaps organised both hierarchically and dynamically according to personal contingency. Our contribution here is in identifying both the range and convergence of these frames, and their collective relevance to GenX women. Considered as an age 'system' we hypothesise these frames may apply to all of these women all of the time; all of these women some of the time; some of these women all of the time; or some of these women some of the time, thus embodying the heterogeneity of postmodern consumer groups (e.g. Morlander, 2023). We developed our research design purposely to capture the nature and richness of this heterogeneity, but not, though, for describing its degree or extent, and we identify this later as a direction for future research. Further, in two instances we needed to bolster our second-order abductive analysis with 'new' themes so as to capture the full range of respondent code diversity (italicised at Table 1, column 2). These offer some potential for extending the ideas covered via Figure 1 but, again, require further empirical exploration and development.

We note that although these frames – individually, and for specific products – may be viable/actionable segments more generally, for our GenX woman these appeared far less definitive, and from an age perspective demonstrate none of the commonality necessary for the group to be considered a segment. Indeed, although the group is clearly

demographically/socially real, psychographically we observe these women to experience a postmodern ageing (Biggs, 2004; Polivka, 2000) enacted via multiple identities and self-descriptions that defy a unified ageist categorisation. Intriguingly, this may also indicate that as generational groups 'age' they become more fragmented – with GenX 'now' being a substantially more diverse cohort than GenX 'then'. Not only this, these women are aware also of the scripts and stereotypes they are either expected (or assumed) to match, and consequently strive often to avoid or to demur, believing themselves no longer tied to the inevitabilities constraining prior generational groups. We observe also that the notions of framing (Goffman, 1974) and stigma (Goffman, 1963) coincide, and we explore this below, identifying further the different ways in which GenX women *react* to how they are perceived.

Masquerade

Masquerade is frequently associated with both ageing and stigma, but this is not necessarily focused on just the 'concealing' of age (Cecil *et al*., 2022). It has also been described as a coping strategy (Biggs, 2004) deployed generally as a means of maintaining a preferred identity. We interpret masquerade for our context in similar fashion, noting this as a *reaction* to the stigmatisation of gendered ageism, but crucially one that can be observed in different forms (see Table 3), dependant on how age-related experiences and understandings may be framed.

Our findings strongly suggest that our diarists identify with a self-perceived rather than preordained age. Indeed, our **Affective** frame suggests age is often 'all in the mind', respondents' perceiving age as better reflected in behaviour, feelings, perceptions and preferences than by chronology (e.g. Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2021; Moschis, 2012). When framed affectively, the stigma of age is countered as a *Reimagining*, as SPA is aligned

intrinsically with how age is sensed. Indeed, CA was only occasionally considered a self-defining measure of self (see also 'My Identity' in Table 2.) and, when deemed appropriate, respondents would '(re)produce' their self-identity (Firat and Schultz, 1997), using Botox, hair colourants, clothes and other available correctives to **Camouflage** their appearance – undertaking 'beauty work' (Clarke and Griffin, 2008) as *Action* that posits SPA as a more potent and visually pre-possessing proxy for age than CA. Our diarists do indeed, 'live by inference' (Goffman, 1959), though find the process of navigating age a significant challenge, pivoting coincidentally between a desire for youthfulness but also avoidance of 'inappropriate' youth-related dress and behaviour. In this way, we see respondents 'trading off' the relative impact of different stigma – which can range from benevolent to hostile (Cary and Chasteen, 2015) - making different choices, perhaps on the basis and nature of an individuals' 'stigma consciousness' (Pinel, 1999). Hoping, perhaps, to occupy a liminal space where they are perceived as "not too old but no longer young" (Rosenthal *et al.,* 2021) and showing how consumption can both mitigate and/or reinforce self-perceived stigma (Eichert and Luedicke, 2022), a condition known as the 'self-stigma paradox' (Corrigan and Watson, 2002).

Frame	Reactions to stigma
Affective	*Reimagination*
Inconsequence	*Indifference, or Dissonance*
Acceptance	*Self-assurance, or Dissonance*
Camouflage	*Action*
Protest	*Defiance*
Inequity	*Incredulity*
Life Stage	*Accommodation*

Table 3. Reactions to stigma

Source: Derived from an interpretive analysis of this study's findings

Further, stigma is closely associated with stereotyping (e.g. Voss, *et al*, 2018), this frequently perceived as a predominantly female hazard, an antecedent to perceived **Inequity,** supporting

prior studies of age-identity as a gendered and intersectional experience (Golombisky, 2018; Veresiu and Parmentier, 2021). This suggests respondents react with *Incredulity* at the way they are asymmetrically positioned, both *against* men and *within* women. Our study revealed, though, that for GenX women, age of itself was not always/exclusively a disparagingly stigmatising factor, and our findings suggest that ambivalent age-based perceptions (Sun *et al*., 2017) are also present, our women unimpressed by 'imposed aesthetic codes' (Jagger, 2005) asserted by others. Our evidence suggested that some consider themselves 'ageless' and that age is **Inconsequential –** never consciously considered - or manifest through **Acceptance,** questioning assumed imperatives to look and act young (Morelock *et al.*, 2017; Amatulli *et al.*, 2015). These imply either *Indifference* or *Self-Assurance* (respectively) in the face of stigma, but may, though – to use the marketing vernacular - be expressions of *Dissonance*, strategies effected for the purpose of managing or denying stigma (Crocket, 2017).

Successful ageing (e.g. Katz and Calasanti, 2015) was construed in many different ways and was applicable in various frames, but changes observed through a **Life-stage** lens were rarely considered in this way. In an attempt to cognitively normalise potentially stigmatising events associated with advancing maturity (such as illness and menopause, and in one instance, of marrying in mid-life) stigma was more likely to be *Accommodated*, perhaps regretted but unavoidable. In this respect diarists reflected rather on their 'inner worth' (McCabe *et al*., 2020), perhaps to deflect against external disapprobation. On occasion, though, women might engage in **Protest** against dynamically emergent stigma (Cecil *et al*., 2022) showing that the intersection of age and gender could also be met with *Defiance*. But to say that our respondents conformed either consistently (or even contiguously) to our 'ideal' matching of frames and stigma would be wrong; rather, they demonstrated a juxtaposition of sited reactions that took account of the different ways in which our frames overlapped and also informed each other.

Method

The study of age and ageing has more often been pursued via extensive (quantitative) rather than intensive (qualitative) means (Amatulli *et al*., 2018), and our chosen approach (SDR) adds an autoethnographic element to third-party data collection. Amatulli *et al.* (2018) found that, in this field, interviews will likely embed age-related bias and are unlikely to surface the active variety inherent in the lived experience. Further, stripped of researcher attendance, these consequently capture data naturally and spontaneously (Thomas *et al*., 2021). Additionally, prior studies have tended to assess age in a contextual vacuum, with Guido *et al*. (2014) suggesting SPA identity assessment needs a defined point of reference if real insight into its dynamic and individualistic nature is to be obtained. In this respect we found diary completion – providing a focused opportunity for ordered self-reference – to be both a liberating and energising self-exploratory experience, allowing respondents to evidence factors that appear to characterise, yet not segment nor constrain them. Our diaries thus, quoting Biggs (2004, p. 54), evidence women narrating "strategic positions rather than an existential truth about ageing or gender identity" with the overarching aim to perform both themselves and their readers through preferred self-representational means. And by incorporating these diaries into a research design that pragmatically combines hermeneutics, reflexivity and Gioia's systematic data structuring, we have been able to merge both abductive and inductive insights to surface the essence of these narratives.

Managerial implications and concluding remarks

GenX is a sizeable demographic group able to support its consumption desires (Lodha, 2022) - its women increasingly formidable players (Bresman and Rao, 2017) making it a cohort that marketers should consider. However, our evidence suggests a chronological model of age

categorization is not appropriate for their understanding, suggesting – at least for our diarists - age as a psychographic, not a demographic, condition. Although in various frames we noted the desire either to be, or to look, younger, this was not a universal aspiration, with the agency to *act*, or *self-represent*, or *defy* perhaps more valued opportunities than to *be.* Our evidence suggested that – again for our diarists - marketers should accept that attempts to promote non-ageing as a generic desire are likely to be neither realistic, always wanted nor achievable. Often, marketers ascribe age expectations to guide their marketing communications (Kuppelwieser and Sarstedt, 2014), yet Manzi *et al*. (2018) suggest chronological segmentation strips age of its social meanings, and this was borne out strongly in our findings. Such appeal is unlikely, therefore, to be seen as authentic, potentially resulting in a loss of trust and, consequently, brand rejection.

Further, our research suggests practitioners should be wary of drifting into stereotyping and tokenism in their marketing communications. Here, CA-related cues may be linked to stigmatised attitudes, assumptions and behaviours that do not reflect nuanced realities, potentially causing offense. Our analysis suggests age boundaries and reactions to stigma are fluid and subjective, with GenX women either suppressing, altering, acknowledging and/or concealing the assumed realities of objectively construed age. This collective voice suggests chronological communication tropes (e.g., over-50s promotions, products recommended or oriented towards over 40s) could amplify and intensify a largely unwelcome age- (Mathur and Moschis, 2005; Åkestam *et al.,* 2021) and stigma- (Pinel, 1999) related consciousness. Women whose self-identity is at odds with CA are unlikely to endure marketing-related representations of ageism, whilst age-inclusivity communications may also be perceived as tokenistic (Mintel, 2019). Heron and Chown (1967) called many years ago for marketing research to be "better employed in discovering ways to check the validity of stereotypes…" (p. 418) whilst Rosenthal

et al. (2021) more recently called for advertisers to actively *destigmatize* their messaging. GenX woman is clearly an age-defined/demographic social grouping with the potential also to be a chronologically-based demographic segment. But the key to effective segmentation (Baines *et al*., 2022) is to focus on that which is coincidentally reachable, actionable and responsive. GenX women are clearly reachable, but unlikely to respond to chronologically-focused cues. Consequently – from an age perspective at least - then neither are they actionable.

The postmodern turn suggests the very notion of structure as impossible, the object and the subject of marketing neither discrete nor separable (Firat and Dholakia, 2006). And we see in our evidence the interplay between marketing and the consumer, and the role played by stigma in its enactment. We evidence, also, age as a fragmented condition – a contested and fluid phenomena (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014) that GenX women refuse to be governed by and which, in their identity work, they use to perform themselves, society and – interestingly - marketing also. And though we acknowledge that in revealing themselves to the market via their buying habits (and in turn providing data subsequently used to sustain and reinforce these habits: Srivastasa *et al.,* 2020) marketers can obtain insights into consumption wants, we see also that by understanding how consumers 'frame' themselves (in our case in relation to age), they can distinguish the extent to which members of social categories generally, and specific social categories in particular, can (or cannot) be conjoined. So, although, for example, our analysis reveals the 'Camouflage' frame as a useful segmenting device, we note also that whilst this includes *some* GenX women (and maybe then, just *some* of the time) it does not typify them.

From a marketing perspective we thus see these women neither as a segment, a tribe, a group of individuals, nor simply points of data in an algorithmic network. Rather, we see their

targeting as a metamodern endeavour that acknowledges both fragmentation and circumscription as poles in a targeting continuum. According to Mills *et al.,* (2020) metamodernism acknowledges oscillation between potentially dichotomous conditions and Felix-Jäger, (in Cooper, 2020, p.1) warns: "we should not fall back into modern universalism, but should also not fall forward into absolute relativism". And though this counsel is aimed at culture, society and ideas at the most fundamental level, it can also be applied to any practical enterprise where there is a temptation to replace - rather than reconcile - the 'old' with the 'new'. We observe GenX women, thus, as a *distributed* cohort whose members are characterised through self-identity rather than CA (Gardiner *et al.,* 2013), but further through a self-identity that is contingently both diverse and multifaceted (Cook, 2018). And especially as they mature, a generational 'myth' to be challenged (Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2022) - and one that seemingly evolves and dissipates as CA and SPA perhaps increasingly diverge over time. These are thus a group that infiltrate many segments, tribes and algorithms and are thus a *moving* target rather than a fixed/easy target. Nevertheless, they are a target worth pursuing, but their pursuit will be all the more effective for the avoidance of stigma-related appeals and an understanding of the reactions that stigmatisation incurs.

Limitations and directions for further research

The completion of online diaries necessitates recruiting participants who have both writing and technology skills (Meth, 2003) and the motivation and interest in the topic to keep daily records. Diarists were largely, though not exclusively, well-educated women in managerial/professional roles, typical of those volunteering for this type of study (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022). This reflected both recruitment networks and, perhaps, highlights the key limitation of our method – that evidence is more likely representative of GenX women who like to complete diaries rather than of GenX women generally. We believe the strengths of

our study, though, outweigh its constraints, but acknowledge the limitations of our results. Further, the study was undertaken with UK residents only, so we make no claim to generalisation for GenX women beyond our specific context.

We see, though, corresponding opportunities for further research arising from our study. Firstly, are the frames we identify generalisable *beyond* our context? Have we identified an authoritative taxonomy of subjective age-related perspectives, or just a point of departure based on one sample of UK GenX women, at this time, that warrants further extension and/or elaboration? Also, although we identify 'age confident' and 'age irrelevance' second-order themes as potentially 'new' age characterisations, will these stand up to further scrutiny and further extend the ideas illustrated at Figure 1.? Further similar research with differently articulated cohorts will help resolve both issues. Secondly, have methodological and recruitment constraints served to over-particularise our findings? Insights from our intensive research could be used to inform and direct additional extensive research, using a survey to help capture greater diversity, but our intensive work could also be enhanced. By following diarists longitudinally (finding especially motivated respondents, and monitoring these over months rather than weeks) we could explore both the consistency and diversity in the lived experience of GenX women. Additional extensive *and* intensive work could then be used to further test our frames-related construct and to explore the *extent* and *degree* to which these frames apply. And finally, although difficult to assess, it would be of interest to evaluate whether SPA identity becomes more fragmented and distinguished from CA over time, an intriguing possibility.

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Dear Generation X Female,

Firstly, Thank You for agreeing to participate in the Female Age Identity: 21-Day Diary Research project. Please remember, you are welcome to ask me any questions about the research, at any stage, by emailing me at [redacted].

Instructions for completing your Diary

1. Start with a Diary Introduction: As a brief introduction to your diary, please tell me about your experience of your last birthday, as detailed below. This is to be sent to the researcher at _____, in addition to Day 1.

2. You will be sent a weekly 'nudge' to remind you to complete your diary, with a week's diary page attached.

3. Daily Diary:

a. When completing your diary on a daily basis, please enter the date dd/mm/yyyy and indicate the day for example

Day 1
Date: 14/08/2021

Day (please highlight)	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday

b. I would like you to record and share with your diary all and age identity-related incidents or occasions that you experienced that day. Please use your diary as a *confidante* (a person or thing you share your closest feelings with) and detail your thoughts on any age identity experiences and incidents that arose that day. For example
   - Was there an experience, or something you brought or did, today, when you felt, looked or acted younger (or possibly older) than your chronological age?
   - Was there an occasion today when the thought of ageing or your age made you feel anxious, nervous or worried?
   - Was there a time today, when you have felt particularly satisfied / dissatisfied with how you have aged?
   - Was there an incident today when you have felt subject to age stereotyping or ageism?

   NB: These are examples only. The most important thing is for you to record your thoughts and share your factual stories about any age identity experiences and incidents that arose in that day. I want to hear about the occasions that you thought about your age (e.g. felt, looked or acted younger – or older) than your chronological (date-of-birth) age.

c. Do just write in your usual diary style – whatever that may be (emojis, bullet points, abbreviations etc.). I am not expecting essays 😊. Be yourself, honest and introspective.
   When sharing your age-identity incidents that happened that day, please do go into detail and include:
   - What were the circumstances? For example,
   - What happened?
   - Where were you (physical surrounding)?
   - Who else was there?
   - What were you doing?

Week 2 Nudge via Email

I look forward to receiving your second week diary pages of any 'age identity incidents'.

I have attached the pages for the second week, either use these or simply email me back, whichever is easiest.

As a reminder, please share any age identity-related incidents or occasions that you experience each day, in your Diary pages. Please use your diary as a *confidante* (a person or thing you share your closest feelings with) and detail your thoughts on any age identity experiences and incidents that arose each day (this week). Share your factual stories about the occasions that you thought about your age and considered yourself a different age (e.g. felt, looked or acted younger – or older) than your chronological (date-of-birth) age.

As before, one completed, please simply email me back a copy (either respond in email, cut and paste to email or attach). Email directly to me, with the subject line: DIARY RESEARCH.

Once again, Thank You for your participation.

Day _
Date: dd/mm/yyyy

Day (please highlight)	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday

Week 3 Nudge via Email

I look forward to receiving your second week diary pages of any 'age identity incidents'.

I have attached the pages for the second week, either use these or simply email me back, whichever is easiest.

Appendix 1 – Participant guidance and nudges *Source: Researcher designed content specific to this study*