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BRIDGING THE GAP: MALE AGING, CONSUMER BEHAVIOR, AND STRATEGIC MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

This study explores the psychological perceptions of aging traits in men and their impact on consumer behavior and marketing strategies, addressing a gap in prior research predominantly focused on women. This research adopts a qualitative approach through one-on-one in-depth interviews, involving 30 participants from diverse age groups. Findings indicate that key aging traits in men include gray hair, baldness, wrinkles and spots, changes in body shape (e.g., beer belly), psychological and behavioral aging, and odor associated with aging. These traits not only signify physical and behavioral aging but also influence men's self-confidence and perceptions of their social roles. Unlike women, men's anxiety about aging is more centered on fears of declining social value and health, profoundly affecting their professional capabilities and image

management needs. This research bridges the gap in understanding men's aging psychology and consumer behavior, offering theoretical and practical insights for developing precise marketing strategies targeting male audiences. It also promotes dual benefits of commercial and social value by aligning with gender equality and aesthetic diversity, providing a reference for future cross-cultural studies on men's aging.

Keywords

Appearance Anxiety, Male Aging Psychology, Male Appearance Anxiety, Aging Marketing

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, the relationship between appearance and aging has drawn increasing attention, profoundly shaping both individual self-identity and corporate strategies. Appearance anxiety, as a psychological phenomenon, is emerging as a critical factor in consumer behavior with significant implications for marketing and management. However, existing studies predominantly focus on women, particularly their demand for anti-aging products and beauty services. By contrast, the emotional responses and fears men experience regarding visible signs of aging, as well as how these psychological states influence their consumption behavior and market potential, remain an underexplored area in the literature.

Men's perceptions of aging diverge from those of women, with their concerns often centered on the expression of social roles and professional competence. Traditionally, appearance-related needs among men have been viewed as secondary. However, as gender roles become more fluid and aesthetic ideals more diverse, men are increasingly attentive to their appearance, particularly in professional and social settings. Aging-related traits, such as baldness, changes in body shape, and "age-related odor," can undermine self-confidence and adversely affect social evaluations. These characteristics not only impact personal image but may also influence others' perceptions of men's professional capabilities and societal contributions.

This shift presents unique opportunities for market innovation and branding strategies. Addressing men's psychological anxieties and consumer needs related to aging, businesses can develop targeted products and campaigns. Examples include fitness and health management services, skincare and scalp care solutions, and personal hygiene products that blend functional and emotional value to resonate with male consumers. Furthermore, deeper exploration of this

market can provide insights into how gender differences shape consumption behavior, enabling companies to devise more precise and effective market segmentation strategies.

This study seeks to bridge the gap in existing research by examining men's emotions and fears related to visible aging and exploring their implications for management practices. It aims to uncover the psychological and behavioral traits associated with male aging and assess their impact on market demand and marketing strategies. By integrating psychological and managerial perspectives, this research aspires to deliver both theoretical and practical contributions, enabling businesses to better capitalize on the potential of the male market while constructing more comprehensive and inclusive brand value propositions.

2. Literature

Past research on the relationship between aging and body image has predominantly focused on women's experiences, particularly how women of different age groups perceive and respond to their body image. In contrast, studies examining men's attitudes toward visible aging and body image remain scarce, resulting in a limited understanding of how men confront physical aging and its implications for consumer behavior and marketing strategies. In modern society, as gender equality and aesthetic diversity continue to evolve, men's concerns about their appearance are rising, presenting significant managerial implications and untapped market potential that warrant further investigation.

Research indicates that women's perceptions of body image vary across age groups. For instance, younger women, facing heightened societal scrutiny, exhibit stronger motivations to maintain a slender physique. Conversely, older women may become less influenced by external judgments due to diminished societal attention on their appearance or the development of more robust self-value systems (Kilpela, Becker, Wesley, & Stewart, 2015; Pruis & Janowsky, 2010). Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with body image tends to persist among women across age groups, demonstrating a high degree of consistency (Pruis & Janowsky, 2010; Quittkat, Hartmann, Düsing, Buhlmann, & Vocks, 2019; Samuels, Maine, & Tantillo, 2019). However, these studies have largely overlooked men, particularly in examining their psychological responses to visible aging and its impact on consumer behavior.

Traditionally, societal norms have placed relatively limited emphasis on men's appearance, and in some cultures, physical aging in men has even been associated with attributes

of maturity, wisdom, and social capital. Consequently, men have historically faced less appearance-related pressure compared to women. However, the rise of social media and new media's promotion of aesthetic ideals has increasingly subjected men to similar pressures. The pursuit of the "perfect appearance" and "fit physique" is no longer exclusive to women. Men now face growing body image pressures, especially as social media amplifies content glorifying "handsome men" and "muscular physiques," thereby establishing new standards for male attractiveness. These ideals not only influence younger men but also subtly shape middle-aged and older men's fears of aging, leading to psychological experiences increasingly akin to those historically observed in women.

Men's fear of visible aging affects not only their personal emotions and social role perceptions but also their consumer behavior and market preferences. Exploring men's attitudes toward aging provides valuable insights into an under-researched area of theory and offers practical implications for marketing strategies. For example, products targeting men—such as fitness equipment, anti-aging skincare, and personal grooming services—could be tailored to address both functional and emotional needs, thereby expanding market opportunities. Additionally, analyzing men's perceptions of body image across different age groups could inform more precise market segmentation and brand positioning strategies.

Understanding men's psychological responses and behaviors related to visible aging, and examining how these psychological shifts translate into market demand, is crucial for filling theoretical gaps in the study of gender and aging. Moreover, it holds significant practical value. Future research should focus on intergenerational differences in men's body image and explore how marketing strategies can effectively address their anxieties about aging and evolving consumption needs.

3. Research method

This study employed a two-stage approach to participant recruitment and data collection. Initially, participants were recruited online, followed by in-person interviews. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and involved a total of 30 participants of diverse ages and genders. Participants were assigned identification codes in chronological order based on their interview times. The demographic characteristics of the sample are outlined below:

- Gender Distribution

The sample consisted of 14 male and 16 female participants, achieving an approximately balanced gender distribution, with female participants slightly outnumbering male participants by one.

- Educational Background

The study did not impose specific restrictions on the participants' educational background, prioritizing diversity in both age and gender. Most participants held at least a university degree. Six participants, currently enrolled in undergraduate programs, reported their highest completed education as high school. Among the remaining participants, 12 held a bachelor's degree, 10 a master's degree, and 2 a doctoral degree.

- Age Distribution

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 45 years, with a relatively even distribution across three age groups: 10 participants were aged 25 or younger, 11 were aged 26–35, and 9 were aged 36–45. Each age group was proportionally represented in the sample.

This sampling strategy ensured a diverse and balanced representation, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the research questions across different demographic segments.

4. Result

In consumer perceptions, while certain aging traits, such as wrinkles and gray hair, are commonly recognized markers of aging across genders, significant differences exist in their manifestation and impact between men and women. For men, visible aging traits are often shaped by an interplay of physical appearance, behavioral patterns, and lifestyle habits. These traits not only influence their outward appearance but also affect their demeanor and psychological state, further shaping consumer evaluations of their overall image.

This section focuses on consumer perceptions of men's aging traits, drawing on interview data to systematically analyze their specific manifestations. The findings identify six key traits associated with visible aging in men: gray hair, baldness, wrinkles and spots, changes in body shape (e.g., "beer belly"), psychological and behavioral aging, and age-related odor. These traits collectively illustrate a distinctive profile of male aging, differing markedly from those associated with women.

The subsequent analysis delves into each of these traits in detail, incorporating respondents' descriptions to uncover how consumers perceive these characteristics and their

impact on the male image. This examination provides a more comprehensive understanding of the role male aging traits play in consumer perceptions, offering empirical evidence of the gendered differences in aging characteristics.

- Gray Hair

For men, gray or thinning hair is a significant marker of aging. While gray hair is often associated with wisdom and experience, it can also convey a sense of being old-fashioned. As one participant (M25-30yr) observed, *“It’s like professors or politicians—having more gray hair can make them look more experienced, but it also makes them look old.”*

Another participant (M28-26yr) elaborated:

“I think one of the biggest signs of aging for men is losing hair volume or having gray hair. Another big one is the beer belly, which comes from frequent social drinking or being too busy to take care of their body. Even men who don’t drink seem to develop a beer belly as they age. This is often accompanied by declining health indicators, like issues with blood pressure or cholesterol.”

- Baldness

Thinning hair or baldness, whether as a receding hairline or a completely bald head, is another visible sign of aging. While some perceive baldness as stylish, others criticize attempts to cover it up. As one participant noted:

“A shaved head can look fine, but when someone uses a lot of hair gel to cover bald spots, it just looks greasy and unattractive.”

Another participant (F1-34yr) expressed mixed views:

“Gray hair and baldness—these are common signs of aging for men. I think some bald looks are attractive, but when someone has oily hair and combs it over to hide bald spots, it’s just gross. It’s not the baldness itself; it’s the attempt to disguise it that makes them look old.”

- Wrinkles and Spots

Similar to women, men also exhibit wrinkles as a visible sign of aging, especially around the nasolabial folds, under-eye bags, and neck. One participant (F2-19yr) commented, *“Nasolabial folds and tear troughs make men look very tired and old.”*

Age spots, often found on the face, arms, and back, were also noted. These are typically caused by sun exposure or skin pigmentation changes associated with aging. Another participant shared:

“Spots from too much time outdoors, like on the face and arms, make the skin look aged.”

A male participant (M9-33yr) added:

“Loose skin or age spots—I do notice these things. Even though I’m only 33, I worry about my skin becoming loose, especially around my waist and back. Plus, I enjoy outdoor activities, so I’ve developed some spots and rough skin from sun exposure. I won’t stop going outside, but I’m still concerned about it.”

- Beer Belly and Other Physical Changes

Many participants mentioned abdominal fat as a prominent sign of aging in men, often linked to lack of exercise, poor diet, or social drinking habits. Unlike women, the “beer belly” appears to be a more exclusive aging marker for men.

One participant (M26-37yr) vividly described his concern:

“For me, it’s posture—starting to hunch over, with the neck leaning forward, and the belly getting bigger. You start looking like a kappa (a Japanese folklore creature). That’s exactly what I don’t want to become.”

- Psychological and Behavioral Aging

Psychological and behavioral changes are composite indicators of aging, reflecting cognitive decline and outward behavior. These include memory loss, irritability, neglect of personal grooming, and rigidity in thoughts or lecturing tendencies. Compared to women, more participants associated aging in men with decreased emotional regulation, such as sudden outbursts of anger.

One participant (F12-42yr) noted:

“For men, aging often shows up as memory loss, neglecting their appearance—like letting wrinkles and gray hair go without care—and growing facial hair. They can also get cranky and start nagging, which happens more often with men than women.”

Another participant (F4-23yr) added:

“Behaviorally, it’s things like avoiding learning new things, becoming forgetful, and preferring to stay at home. It’s similar to women, but men also tend to talk less as they age.”

- "Old Man Smell"

A unique and frequently mentioned trait of aging in men is the development of a distinct “old man smell.” This trait was strongly associated with men and attributed to physiological factors such as declining metabolism and changes in sweat and sebaceous gland activity, as well as behavioral habits like neglecting personal hygiene.

One participant (M16-32yr) expressed his aversion:

“Out of all the signs of aging, the one I can’t stand the most is the smell that older men give off. It’s just unpleasant. I’m not sure why they have this odor, but it’s especially noticeable on buses or in places with a lot of elderly people.”

These observations highlight the multifaceted nature of aging traits in men, encompassing physical, behavioral, and even olfactory dimensions that significantly influence consumer perceptions and societal expectations.

5. Marketing Implication

Men’s anti-aging behaviors prominently feature fitness-related expenditures, including gym memberships, personal training, strength training equipment, and aerobic exercise costs. Activities such as team sports, muscle enhancement programs, running, and cycling are highlighted as effective for sculpting physique, delaying aging, reducing stress, and enhancing mental well-being, contributing to vitality and quality of life.

Skincare and health supplements also play a significant role. Popular skincare products include toners, face masks, moisturizers, and sunscreens, addressing dryness and aging signs. Dietary supplements like lutein, fish oil, and pollen are used to improve complexion and replenish nutrients. While some doubt supplement efficacy, most stress their value in maintaining health and appearance, emphasizing preventive care in aging.

Lastly, concerns about “old man smell” suggest a market opportunity for innovative olfactory-focused products, reflecting emerging demands in the anti-aging sector. In summary, men’s anti-aging consumption behaviors exhibit a comprehensive model that combines technical solutions, traditional lifestyle practices, and emerging needs. This approach extends beyond a focus on external appearance to include considerations of physical and mental health as well as overall vitality. These behaviors demonstrate a more diverse and sophisticated understanding of anti-aging strategies, which can be broadly categorized into three types: exercise and fitness-related consumption, skincare and health supplements, and strategies for addressing age-related odors. These categories provide a framework for analyzing the multidimensional aspects of men’s anti-aging practices.

- **Exercise and Fitness-Related Consumption**

Exercise and fitness-related expenditures emerge as a central component of men’s anti-aging strategies, encompassing a variety of activities and associated costs. These include regular

participation in gym classes, hiring personal trainers for strength training, and opting for advanced techniques such as kinetic fat reduction programs to enhance muscle tone and rapidly improve physical appearance. Others prefer lower-cost outdoor activities, such as running or cycling, which are celebrated for their accessibility and effectiveness in boosting physical fitness. Many respondents highlighted the multifaceted benefits of these activities, from improving physical condition and delaying signs of aging to relieving stress and enhancing mental well-being.

One respondent shared:

"I make it a habit to hit the gym regularly and also play team sports to maintain my physique and build muscle. Since I naturally have a darker skin tone, I think exercising adds to a sun-kissed, youthful vibe. Plus, staying fit keeps me healthier overall and gives me a more youthful energy in how others perceive me." (M29-40yr)

Another described a newer trend:

"Have you heard of it? It's been around for a while now—kinetic fat reduction uses some sort of electromagnetic field or something to stimulate your muscles. It's like a lazy person's workout! They claim 30 minutes is equivalent to 20,000 crunches. I wouldn't say it's that effective, but it does work! It's like having someone else do the workout for you." (M17-22yr)

Others highlighted daily routines for long-term benefits:

"I do 30 minutes of light exercise and stretching daily to maintain my muscle health and slow the aging process. I also apply sunscreen every time I go outside to avoid tanning and skin damage. Recently, I've started Pilates to better understand muscle composition and learn how to effectively engage smaller muscle groups for both sculpting and functional movement." (M22-23yr)

• Skincare and Health Supplements

Skincare and health supplements are another key area of anti-aging consumption for men. Many respondents reported using skincare products such as toners, face masks, moisturizers, and sunscreen to combat dryness and aging. In addition, supplements like lutein, fish oil, and pollen were frequently mentioned as part of daily routines to improve complexion and replenish nutrients. While some participants expressed doubts about the efficacy of certain supplements, the majority acknowledged their value in maintaining appearance and health. One respondent noted:

"After prolonged sun exposure, I always use a face mask to rehydrate and prevent the aging effects of overexposure." (M24-27yr)

Skincare routines also play a role in managing specific concerns:

"I use face masks and moisturizers to prevent skin problems and keep my appearance from looking older than my actual age." (M24-27yr)

- Addressing “Old Man Smell”

Several respondents expressed concern about “old man smell,” even though specific actions or products to address it were not widely mentioned. This olfactory aspect of aging highlights a significant market opportunity for innovative solutions. Products that effectively address this issue could appeal not only to older consumers but also to younger individuals with preventative needs. Marketing strategies emphasizing product innovation and effectiveness—paired with emotional narratives like “Stay fresh, regain confidence” or “Your scent defines your image”—could enhance perceived quality of life and increase brand loyalty.

One respondent reflected on this issue:

"Out of all the signs of aging, the one I can't stand is the smell older men give off. It's unpleasant, and I don't know why it happens, but you notice it on buses or in spaces with older people. It's so obvious. Can't there be something to prevent it? Like how younger guys use deodorant for sweat—could there be a product to stop this smell? If so, I'd definitely look into it and start using it early!" (M16-32yr)

These responses demonstrate a comprehensive approach to male anti-aging consumption, integrating physical fitness, skincare, health supplements, and emerging needs such as odor management. This multifaceted model reflects a growing sophistication in men's strategies for maintaining vitality, health, and appearance.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on the psychological perceptions of aging traits in men and their implications for consumer behavior, addressing a gap in existing research that has predominantly centered on women. The findings reveal six key aging traits associated with men: gray hair, baldness, wrinkles and spots, abdominal fat and changes in body shape, psychological and behavioral aging, and age-related odor. These traits not only signify the physical and behavioral dimensions of aging but also profoundly affect men's self-confidence and performance in social roles on a psychological level.

Unlike women's aging traits, men's psychological responses to aging are more prominently tied to anxieties about declining social value and fears of deteriorating health. For

instance, physical changes such as baldness and abdominal fat not only impact their appearance but also evoke concerns about professional competence and social evaluation. Psychological and behavioral manifestations, such as reduced emotional regulation, neglect of personal grooming, and an increased tendency to lecture, present further challenges in social contexts. Additionally, the issue of "old man smell" highlights the negative impact of olfactory cues on perceptions of male aging and underscores untapped market opportunities for addressing this concern.

Based on these findings, several implications are drawn. First, businesses should develop targeted products addressing men's aging traits, such as anti-aging skincare, scalp care solutions for baldness, and personal hygiene products to combat age-related odor. Product design and marketing strategies should not only emphasize functionality but also incorporate emotional value, promoting a healthy and confident image that meets men's dual needs for external appearance and psychological well-being.

Second, the diversity of men's aging traits and the varying consumption needs across age groups provide ample opportunities for market segmentation and positioning. For example, younger men show a stronger demand for fitness-related products, while middle-aged and older men are more interested in anti-aging products and health management services. Through effective market segmentation, brands can better target specific consumer groups and deliver personalized products and services.

Moreover, the promotion of educational and preventive awareness is an essential strategy. Companies can utilize educational marketing to enhance men's understanding of aging and highlight the importance of early adoption of anti-aging products or engagement in health-related activities. By doing so, brands can help consumers mitigate aging traits while establishing trust and a professional brand image.

Finally, emotional marketing and the establishment of brand value should center on the psychological needs of male consumers. Brands should emphasize values such as confidence, attractiveness, and health to resonate with their audience. For instance, addressing the issue of "old man smell" in advertising could communicate concepts such as "freshness" and "revitalized energy," linking products to positive lifestyle attitudes. This approach can strengthen consumers' identification with and loyalty to the brand.

This study fills a critical gap in research on men's psychological responses to aging and their associated consumer behaviors, offering both theoretical and practical insights for future

marketing strategies. These findings also help brands address male market demands more comprehensively within the context of gender equality and aesthetic diversity, achieving dual commercial and societal value. Future research could explore the cultural variations in men's aging traits and their impacts, providing a more global perspective for market strategies.

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