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THE BODY IMAGE OF THE CONTEMPORARY SENIOR AND ITS INTERPRETATIONS. THE PERSPECTIVE OF DIFFERENT GENERATIONS

Abstract. This article discusses part of a qualitative study carried out among representatives of four generations (the traditionalist generation, baby boomers, generation X, and generation Y), which reveals intergenerational differences in the way the ageing human body is perceived and the body practices to which it is currently exposed.

Using the category of generations and assuming that the human body is a social construct resulting from the process of the socialisation of the biological – a symbolic form reflecting the rules, social hierarchies and cultural obligations binding in a given society and at a given historical moment, the article proposes an answer to the question: how does the moment of life of representatives of different generations, and thus the socio-cultural conditions defining selected generations of Polish men and women, determine the way in which the appearance of the body of contemporary seniors is interpreted?

The collected material allows us to perceive generational differences (in the chosen topic), while the literature used helps to interpret the results of the study.

Keywords: ageing body, intergenerational approach, traditionalist generation, baby boomers, generation X, generation Y.

WYGLĄD CIAŁA WSPÓŁCZESNEGO SENIORA I JEGO INTERPRETACJE. PERSPEKTYWA PRZEDSTAWICIELI RÓŻNYCH POKOLEŃ

Abstrakt. Artykuł stanowi omówienie fragmentu badań jakościowych przeprowadzonych wśród przedstawicieli czterech pokoleń (pokolenia tradycyjistów, baby boomers, pokolenia X

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i pokolenia Y), ukazujących międzygeneracyjne różnice w sposobie postrzegania starzejącego się ciała człowieka, jak też praktyk cielesnych, którym jest ono współcześnie poddawane.

Posługując się kategorią pokolenia, jak też przyjmując, że ciało człowieka to konstrukt społeczny będący wynikiem procesu uspołecznienia tego co biologiczne, to symboliczna forma, odzwierciedlająca obowiązujące w danym społeczeństwie i w danym momencie historycznym reguły, społeczne hierarchie i zobowiązania kulturowe, artykuł proponuje odpowiedź na pytanie: w jaki sposób moment życia badanych reprezentantów różnych pokoleń, a zatem i uwarunkowania społeczno-kulturowe definiujące wybrane generacje Polaków i Polek, kategoryzują sposób interpretowania wyglądu ciała współczesnego seniora?

Zgromadzony materiał pozwala na dostrzeżenie (w obranym zagadnieniu) różnic pokoleniowych, zaś wykorzystana literatura przedmiotu pomaga w interpretacji wyników badania.

Słowa kluczowe: starzejące się ciało, ujęcie międzygeneracyjne, pokolenie tradycjonalistów, baby boomers, pokolenie X, pokolenie Y.

1. Introduction

Ageing is a process that takes place on three basic levels. The first is the biological level, i.e. physiological ageing, which is externally observable (Szatur-Jaworska, Błędowski, Dzięgielewska 2006: 48–52). For example, wrinkles appear as a result of the body's decreasing ability to bind and retain water in the epidermis, making the skin less elastic. This is followed by greying of the hair and the need for corrective glasses as the thickening of the eye lens makes it difficult to see objects at close range. There is also a loss of height with age, as changes in bone structure cause older people to stoop. Between the ages of 55 and 75, body weight also decreases, with loss of connective tissue, bone tissue and muscle mass (Kowalewska, Jaczewski, Komosinska 2005: 9–18).

The second level is the psychological level. Changes in the psyche of older people are analysed mainly in the context of personality and mental performance (Leszczyńska-Rejchert 2005: 48–55, 101–106). The thought processes of older people are characterised by slowness, concreteness, simplicity of interpretation and difficulties in abstract thinking. Learning new things takes longer (due to declining fluid intelligence), but the ease with which memories are recalled is a manifestation of high activity in the hippocampus (the part of the brain where memories are stored) and thus a high level of crystallised intelligence. Post-formal thinking, i.e. allowing more than one correct solution to a problem, is also characteristic of older people (Porzych, Kędzióra-Konratowska, Polak, Porzych 2004: 165–168).

The third level of progressive ageing is the social level. One of the manifestations of the changes taking place in this dimension is the end of working life or a change in social roles. The role of employee/worker is replaced by that of grandmother or grandfather – a role that is important for the self-image of older people. Taking on the role of a pensioner often entails the activation of neighbourhood roles, social roles, roles as a member of the local or religious community (Szatur-Jaworska, Błędowski, Dzięgielewska 2006: 55–58). The trends observed

today also lead us to invoke the process of aestheticisation (Kramkowska 2020) or the juvenilisation of old age (Konieczna-Woźniak 2012), as a result of which seniors today often assume the role of tourists, students at the University of the Third Age, or consumers of goods and services aimed at rejuvenating the appearance of the ageing body. “The process of ageing in Western societies has triggered a new discourse at the scientific, social and economic levels, related to diets for the elderly, their physical activity and cosmetics for seniors, with the sole aim of changing their ageing bodies” (Adamczyk 2021: 70). Consumer culture and the media-promoted ‘cult’ of the young, i.e. a fit and active body, imply the formation of a new profile of the contemporary senior citizen, who seeks to delay the consequences of biological, psychological or social ageing and, to this end, creates a new role of the older person, i.e. the role of user and consumer of the beauty and wellness sector.

The complexity of the ageing process is a social and scientific challenge – the issue is the subject of numerous analyses and research studies. This focus is justified because, for instance, 22.3% of Poland’s current population is aged 60 and over. The results of the 2021 census in Poland indicate that the proportion of people in the post-working age group has increased by more than 5% compared to 2011. This means that in the course of the decade the number of people aged 60/65 and over has increased by almost 2 million, meaning that more than one in five Polish citizens is now over 60 (Statistics Poland 2022: 24–25). The complex nature of the ageing process is also an individual challenge. A personal approach to the progressive process of ageing requires an individual response. The nature of the ageing process itself – the speed, intensity and unpleasantness of the changes experienced – is the result of many factors determined by an individual’s biography. The same applies to the perception of the ageing human body, which is the surface on which these changes take place.

Human corporeality is the biological and socio-cultural basis for human functioning and for experiencing the surrounding reality. Well-functioning systems and organs responsible for individual physiological activities (biological aspect) enable human beings to live a successful, i.e. healthy, existence. Understanding the body as a socio-cultural reality means treating it as an unfinished social phenomenon that is subject to constant change. The body is a social construct resulting from the process of socialisation of the biological (Bourdieu 2004), it is the basis of social interaction and the means by which the individual is included or excluded from society. The body is a symbolic form that reflects the rules, social hierarchies and cultural obligations in force in a given society and at a given historical moment (Buczowski 2005; Turner 1984). A perfect example of this is the changing appearance and perception of the ageing human body. Two questions arise here. First, the body is supposed to provide modern humans not only with a basis for well-being, but also with social acceptance (Adamczyk 2021: 72). Second, contemporary consumer culture has not developed different patterns of beauty that are in harmony with the biological phases of life, so it may be that social attitudes towards old age and the

appearance of the ageing body are not far from symbolic violence (Bourdieu, Wacquant 2001: 131–170). These issues need to be further explored.

This article presents an excerpt from a qualitative study conducted among representatives of four generations (the traditionalist generation, baby boomers, generation X, and generation Y), which reveals intergenerational differences in the way seniors perceive the appearance of the ageing body, as well as the body practices to which it is now subjected.

2. Research methodology

The content presented in this article is empirical material collected during a qualitative study conducted in the first quarter of 2022, using an unstructured interview with a standardised list of sought-after information (Konecki 2000: 169–170).

Representatives of four generations were invited to participate in the interviews, the term ‘generation’ being understood as a collective of people born at the same time who develop natural or consciously desired ties, in the formation of which the commensurability of their life experience and a particular type of social localisation, i.e. a similar location in the historical dimension of the social process, play a key role. Generational localisation is ‘the accessibility to a stock of potential experience that influences the production of a tendency towards a certain characteristic way of thinking, experiencing, acting – which is the result of a subjectively experienced time or point of view’ (Szafraniec 2022: 39). Thus, a generation is a collective of people who live at the same time, are influenced by the same events and therefore perceive reality in a similar way, have a similar system of values, similar expectations towards various social problems and even corresponding ways of realising their needs (Kopertyńska, Kmiotek 2014: 41–42). In the light of this definition, the distinction between generations is a matter of accepted convention, which is why the various classifications differ both in terms of age range and nomenclature (Gierańczyk 2022: 26).

A reference point for many sociological analyses is the American classification of generations, which distinguishes between the traditionalist generation (born between 1918 and 1945), baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) and generation Y (born between 1981 and 1995) (Wątroba 2017: 32). The research reported in this paper uses this generational classification.

Sixteen representatives of each generation took part in the interviews, the traditionalist generation¹, baby boomers², generation X³, and generation Y⁴.

¹ The traditionalist generation are narrators aged 77 and over at the time of the research.

² This group of respondents included people aged 58–76 (at the time of the survey).

³ Generation X are narrators aged 42–57.

⁴ This group of narrators included people who were 27–41 years old at the time of the research.

The selection of the sample was purposive and its criteria, apart from belonging to the selected generation, were the respondents' gender and place of residence (urban/rural). Taking these assumptions into account, each generation was represented by 8 women and 8 men, 8 urban residents⁵ and 8 rural residents⁶. A total of 64 interviews were conducted.

The research topics concerned old age and older people in the memories of representatives of different generations and their opinions on contemporary old age and today's seniors. The general research problem was analysed by means of specific questions, one of which concerned the visual aspect of old age and the appearance of older people. These questions are the content of the presented study.

In view of the above, the material presented in this text will be a discussion around a central problem, which for the purposes of this text has been formulated in following question: *How does the moment of life of the interviewed representatives of different generations, and thus the socio-cultural conditions that define the selected generations of Polish men and women, categorise the way in which they interpret the appearance of the body of a contemporary human being experiencing progressive ageing processes?*

To find an answer to this problem, the following specific questions will be helpful:

- a) What is the definition of old age used by respondents of different generations and is it related (if so, how?) to the perception of human physicality?
- b) How do respondents perceive the appearance of the contemporary older body and the practices to which it is subjected?
- c) What events, conditions or values specific to each generation might have influenced the perception and interpretation of the appearance of the ageing body of today's seniors?

3. Defining old age according to different generations

A key point, helpful in understanding and interpreting the strictly physical content, is to recall the definition of old age used by the representatives of the different generations interviewed. Let us begin the presentation of the empirical material in chronological order, starting with the perspective of the representatives of the oldest of the generations surveyed – the traditionalist generation, i.e. people aged 77 and over at the time of the survey.

⁵ The city from which the respondents came was Białystok, the capital of the Podlaskie voivodship.

⁶ The villagers lived in suburban villages within 10 km of Białystok and in a village 60 km from Białystok, where the author of the study grew up.

The analysis of the content of the interviews shows that the personal experiences of the interviewees, resulting from a specific moment in their biography, influence their understanding of old age. The respondents identified old age with physical infirmities and health problems. They also distinguished the category of 'real old age', i.e. frail, dependent, confined old age. Here are some extracts from the narrators' statements.

For me, old age is basically the state where the body starts to disobey. It doesn't want to listen to what's in the head. In the head there is still the desire to live, to move, to explore, to learn new things, but unfortunately the body is already forcing you to sit in a chair, not even to go out. It is also the physical wear and tear on the body. That is old age for me. (F, 81, CITY⁷)

Or:

Old age is a kind of terrible infirmity. First what comes to my mind is that you can no longer cope, that you need some kind of care from a family member, possibly a stranger. It's really starting to become, you know, real old age. (F, 83, VILLAGE)

Old age is therefore perceived by the oldest respondents through the prism of the consequences of the biological ageing of the human body. And since the biological dimension is so important, the answer to the specific question posed above about the possible relationship between the definition of old age used and the perception of human physicality seems obvious. These levels are interrelated.

Defining old age through the prism of changing physicality was also characteristic of the younger generation – the baby boomers. People born between 1946 and 1964, when asked how they understood old age, often referred to changing physicality and the associated imperfections of the body – all kinds of them. As one of the women interviewed said

For me, old age has always been perceived as an imperfection of the body, an imperfection of the mind. The perception of appearance too. (F, 71, CITY)

Changes in a person's physicality, which is one of the key elements defining old age, also appeared in the statements of older men from the post-war baby-boom generation. One of them confessed:

I associate old age more with appearance, well, maybe it's not nice to say, with the degree of infirmity, or whatever you want to call it. (M, 75, CITY)

⁷ The information in brackets for each respondent indicates the respondent's gender (F – female, M – male), the respondent's age, and the respondent's place of residence.

Another one said:

In the case of old age, I think it's rather that most people, looking at it from the outside, see it as something that doesn't bring pride or anything, but just a hassle because the body works differently. (M, 69, CITY)

The quoted extracts suggest that the changing physicality of older people is the *differentia specifica* of old age for the baby boomer generation. It should be noted that women emphasised changes in the appearance of the ageing body, while men emphasised the body's declining functionality.

A very different understanding of old age was shared by members of generation X. There was no reference to the appearance or infirmity of the older persons, quite the opposite. Those born between 1965 and 1980 defined old age as a time of well-earned rest and a period of life marked by experience and wisdom. This is what one male respondent said:

Old age is maturity and wisdom. These are the two possibilities. Because a man is born stupid, then he gets the hang of it, but he gets burned by various things. And then he becomes wise. So these are two things, two such concepts, when it comes to old age. I don't think I have any others. Because as far as infirmity is concerned, I don't put it down to that, because some people stay fit until the end, so it doesn't make any sense at all. It depends on some predisposition of the body. (M, 42, VILLAGE)

The understanding of old age presented here is relevant to the way in which respondents from this generation interpreted the appearance of the ageing body, as will be discussed below.

The last generation surveyed was generation Y, i.e. people born between 1981 and 1995. When dissecting the interviewees' responses regarding their understanding of old age, we find that an important component of the definition they used was changes in external appearance, which are specific to this period of life. One woman explained:

Old age is a period of life that I usually associate with two things. Firstly, with age, that is, with reaching a certain threshold. And the second thing is that I also associate old age with people who are at a certain visual stage, in terms of their appearance, so to speak. These are people who you can see may already have health problems, and you can also see from their appearance that they are in a certain age group. (F, 38, CITY)

A similar view was expressed by one of the men:

When I think of old age, I usually think of someone who is old, sick and has grey hair. Probably, if you go back in time, still wearing a headscarf. So you can see from the image that the person is older. (M, 35, CITY)

We can therefore see a certain convergence between the baby boomers and generation Y, both of whom, in sharing their understanding of the concept of old age, draw attention to its important dimension of physical change. However, the

youngest generation surveyed also shared some interesting thoughts on the appearance of the ageing body, which were not mentioned by the respondents from the older generations. But more on this in a moment.

There is no doubt, therefore, that the way in which old age is defined by representatives of different generations is linked to perceptions of human physicality.

4. Representatives of different generations on the appearance of the ageing body of a contemporary older person and the practices to which it is subjected

Let us now look at what the respondents said when asked about the body image of today's older men and women. As is traditional, we start with the oldest generation.

This is how one of the men described it:

A woman dresses fashionably, according to her age. She looks after her appearance. Men also take care of themselves. You can see the way they are dressed. It's only the homeless who dress differently, and yes, men also take care of themselves. Today, when I go to the hairdresser's, it's these old grannies who come in. And they dye their hair. I'm telling you, when a man is well groomed like that, he looks different somehow. (M, 84, CITY)

And here is an interesting comment from an older woman – a resident of the city:

It seems to me that older people take better care of themselves not only in old age, but earlier, I would say even earlier, not only in old age. They took more care of themselves in the beginning and now, in their old age, it has stayed with them. I think life is better today than it used to be. Such a better standard of living. (F, 83, CITY)

It is possible that the development of self-care habits signalled by the woman is related to where the older person lives, which is indirectly related to the level of education of urban and rural older people and the type of work they do.

Respondents were also asked about the reasons for self-care among today's older men and women. What motivates them? Why do they do it? The traditionalists were all agreed on this point – they all said they did it for themselves.

For their appearance, for their well-being, they improve their appearance. For example, I do it for myself, not for society. When I dress delicately or emphasise my beauty, I do it for myself. Because it is a burden, such neglect, it is a burden. If I take care of myself, it gives me such energy and life. (F, 93, CITY)

Representatives of the baby boomer generation also shared their observations on the appearance of today's seniors. They had no doubt that the attractiveness of older people had changed, i.e. they shared the views of the previous generation. However, they were less clear and positive about the practices of their boomers' peers in relation to changing physicality than the traditionalists who were older than them.

I have to say that old age today is different – explained one of the women – different. I wouldn't say prettier, uglier. It is today, I feel, that this time, this entry into old age, used to involve certain mechanisms, for example dark clothes, naturalness, all kinds of embellishments were not an option. And today, it seems to me, all this has become blurred. Everyone lives in their profile, as they like it, as they feel more comfortable. And sometimes maybe to show off to others (laughs). (F, 68, CITY)

A similar observation about the prevalence of rejuvenation practices was made by another respondent:

There is definitely more of a desire to rejuvenate this age group today. Because in the 1950s, 1960s, if I can put it in perspective, this age group, this old age, was not hidden. It simply progressed. And today they want to hide this period of life. I think that this kind of rejuvenation is sometimes exaggerated. It's funny how women look like they're wearing such tight clothes. I think there are some things that are not appropriate for old age. (F, 71, CITY)

The woman's statement was in line with the question about the reasons why today's seniors are active in self-care. Respondents from the baby boomer generation pointed to general social changes, which naturally resulted in a change in seniors' attitudes to their own appearance.

Because of the conditions – explained one of the men – today's seniors take care of themselves differently than in the past. Well, certainly the conditions are different, well, they have different financial possibilities, probably, because of that. (M, 75, VILLAGE)

It is time for the insights of generation X representatives. Firstly, they pointed out that the ageing body of a contemporary senior can be interpreted as a reflection of prevailing trends and as an imitation by seniors. The responses of the respondents referred directly to the use of rejuvenation of the body image of seniors. Significantly, this was not necessarily seen in a positive light by the respondents. "In general, it's a bit of a stretch of naturalness," said one woman.

In my opinion, any form that's not an exaggeration is acceptable if it's for the person's benefit. Because it's worse when an older person who's undergoing treatment thinks they're great and everyone around them judges them differently. Because it is a bit of a skill to beautify and not exaggerate. (F, 48, CITY)

Similarly, another respondent said:

We don't always really rejuvenate ourselves, because sometimes we even hurt ourselves, don't we? But the motive behind the use of aesthetic medicine today is to combat the passage of time and the changes that occur. I see wrinkles, I go and do something to make those wrinkles go away. It seems to me that this cult of youth imposed by the media has made us run away from old age. (F, 57, VILLAGE)

It should be noted that the above opinions are women's perspectives. Men were less critical in this regard. For example, in response to a question about the body image of a contemporary older person, one of them said:

Today it's the hairdresser, the beautician, eyebrows and nails. Well, it's just, well, all that applies to the young, it also applies to the old. Well, there are probably a few of them somewhere, but the scale is completely different, they just don't have that need. I see lots and lots of opportunities and they take advantage of them. Cool. (M, 44, CITY)

Secondly, generation X respondents pointed out that the appearance of an ageing human body today is a product of the long-term actions and choices that a modern senior man or woman has made over the years.

The intervention in this corporeality, in the direction of aesthetic medicine, does not begin in old age. It starts in middle age. And if someone gets stuck in this, well, in this old age, they do it because they already have this need to do something like this. (F, 48, CITY)

Or:

I would say here that while in my childhood the class factor was probably so important, now I think the fortune factor becomes important in old age. So it has something to do with the fact that some people prepare for old age and others don't. And today we decide about ourselves. Even about our appearance. (F, 52, CITY)

Thus, on the one hand, the body image of today's seniors is, according to generation X respondents, the result of imitating younger generations, but on the other hand, succumbing to prevailing trends turns out to be a long-term strategy, and not just the strategy of the older persons. As one woman said:

The media, the entertainment industry, the fashion industry, the textile industry have to respond in some way to the needs of these older groups. And now the question – is it worth it for us to let these people grow old with dignity? Well, no. Economically, it's not worth it. We have to create in them the need to be young, because this need will generate certain consumption needs. And now the whole procedure is: *let's not let them grow old with dignity, because they will sit down and want nothing.* (F, 48, VILLAGE)

And then there is the interesting position of the youngest respondents, generation Y, and the interesting conclusions that can be drawn from their observations.

The first observation is that the appearance of today's older people does not correspond to the stereotypical image of the elderly. Here is an example of a man's explanation:

There is no such thing as typical old age. Traditional old age. I don't see that anymore. The kind of people where, for example, you can see from a distance that it's a really old person, typically that old. Well, now I'm saying that I don't see that kind of old age. Maybe it's because old age has dressed itself up in such clothes, I mean with progress, because it's so rejuvenated. I don't see that kind of old age. (M, 33, VILLAGE)

A second interesting reflection from generation Y respondents was the perceived prevalence of practices to rejuvenate the appearance of the ageing body.

The youngest respondents, like those from generation X, felt that taking care of oneself, of one's appearance, was a particular skill, a manifestation of a sensible attitude to the practices available, which they felt was obligatory/should be obligatory by the time one reaches old age. One woman explained:

I don't think it's appropriate for older people to go into such extreme visualisations that are inconsistent with their everyday appearance or their life so far (...) It's all about moderation, it's always worthwhile, regardless of age. And while experimentation is forgivable for children and young people, I think it is less forgivable from the point of view of older people. (F, 38, CITY)

Respondents were also asked about the body image motivations that might be behind the engagement of today's older people in some activities and not others.

It's an exaggerated pursuit of youth – said one woman – when they have so much plastic surgery that it becomes visible. Then you can think that this person can't accept that he or she is already his or her age. (F, 35, CITY)

One man, however, had an insight into the psychological benefits that can motivate older people. He explained:

Well, I think it's about giving these older people satisfaction. I think it's that they look younger, they feel younger and maybe the mental wellbeing is better. (M, 36, CITY)

5. Generational determinants of the perception and interpretation of the appearance of the ageing body of today's seniors

With this in mind, and with reference to the literature on the specifics of each generation, let us try to find an answer to the last of the specific questions, i.e. which events/conditions or value systems specific to each generation could have/had an impact on the perception and interpretation of the appearance of the ageing body of seniors in its contemporary version by their representatives?

If one listens to the statements of the representatives of the traditionalist generation, it is not difficult to recognise the baggage of life experience resulting, among other things, from the fact that they have lived through seven decades and more, which in the history of Poland have been full of events that have changed the socio-cultural space of our society. The oldest interviewees remember very well the depiction of the older persons they observed in their childhood, and this is an important reference point when forming an opinion about the image of the contemporary older people. As one woman put it:

Today, age is incomparable. Older people today take great care of themselves! And they have teeth, especially dentures, and their clothes are different, more colourful. And their hairstyles are different. There is certainly a change, a big change. (F, 79, VILLAGE)

What it was like 40 or 50 years ago and what it is like today – explained another interviewee – I'd say it's heaven and earth. The conditions are different, in every house there is, as they say, a bathroom, you can take a bath, wash your legs and so on. (...) Old people take care of themselves, that is self-evident. (M, 85, VILLAGE)

It can be said that the traditionalist generation has experienced 'first-hand' how important it is to have access to amenities that enhance the quality of daily life and the opportunity to take care of oneself. Especially as the respondents quoted are rural residents. The standard of living in rural Poland has risen significantly over the past half century (Kramkowska 2023).

The opinions of the oldest respondents on the appearance of the body of a contemporary older person seem to indicate that it is interpreted by them as a 'vehicle' for general social change and improved living conditions, of which the older persons are also the beneficiaries. The not-so-optimistic portrait of the older people that the interviewees recalled from childhood – as people who are often dependent on others, who take less care of themselves (due to a lack of conditions), or who are even neglected, without teeth, wearing 'worn out' clothes – is an image of disregarded people, perhaps invisible also because of their inconspicuous clothing. The ideal term for such a profile of the older persons remembered by the traditionalist generation is the one proposed by Elżbieta Trafiałek: "the generation that was taught humility", which the author explains by the fact that the socialisation of people born between 1918 and 1945 took place in conditions "when old age did not give entitlement to anything" (Trafiałek 2003: 107); it was, as it were, invisible. Such an 'image' of old age remained rooted in the memory of the traditionalists. Nevertheless, the social changes that have taken place in Polish society over the course of their lives have contributed to an improvement in the quality of life of Poles, including the older persons. The oldest respondents seem to emphasise this positive change and the fact that they also benefit from it, that they become more visible, that their ageing bodies are groomed, dressed colourfully, as if to signal that they belong and fit into the social landscape. The practices of the contemporary older people in terms of their physical appearance were clearly interpreted positively by the traditionalists. One man admitted:

Old age used to be poor. These people used to walk around in such old rags, sitting somewhere by the house or by the stove, so what was the life of such a person? It's not like today. I wouldn't want to have been old then, oh no! (M, 85, VILLAGE)

A slightly different interpretation of the appearance of the ageing body of the modern senior was expressed by the baby boomers. Yes, like the traditionalists, they perceived a significant improvement in the conditions for self-care, which

went hand in hand with an improvement in the appearance of older people. However, they were critical of what they saw as the excessive exposure of the ageing body to rejuvenation procedures. It seems that the baby boomer respondents interpret the physical appearance of today's seniors as a (possibly) 'desperate' desire to show off to the world, to draw attention to themselves, even at the cost of ridicule.

It is also necessary to mention the social conditions specific to the period of socialisation and adolescence of the boomers – we are talking about the spread of youth culture in the 1960s, i.e. the cult of youth, which manifested itself, among other things, in the apotheosis of strength, vitality or an attractive (young) appearance. "Baby boomers are the first generation to have a distinct and spectacular youth culture." (Wątroba 2017: 298). Certainly, the American ideals propagated during their youth, when confronted with the Polish reality, resulted in a somewhat conservative attitude of the interviewees towards the reality of then and now. The socialisation process of people from the baby boomer generation took place in an atmosphere of devaluation of everything that American and Western European culture brought with it, and such a narrative may inadvertently influence their critical interpretation of what they perceive today. We also read in the source material that it is the baby boomer generation (especially in the US) that has a strong need to create an image of old age and the older persons that is very different from/opposite to the one they saw in their own youth (Wątroba 2022: 72–74). However, in the case of the Polish boomers, things seem to be a little different, and they feel that this image should still be created with respect for the principles of good taste.

The next generation, generation X, is the generation of middle-aged people who, although born during the period of the Polish People's Republic, spent most of their adult lives in the post-transformation socio-political space. A characteristic feature of the representatives of generation X was that they grew up in conditions marked by their mothers' professional activity. As Krystyna Szafraniec points out, "the need to catch up in terms of career and education, the striving for a decent standard of living and, in many cases, the struggle for survival, had far-reaching consequences for family life, including the content and lifestyle of family upbringing. Children observed busy parents competing for money – to survive or to fulfil life's dreams" (Szafraniec 2022: 56). The idea of material goods as a desirable value permeated the consciousness and everyday functioning of families at that time. This was encouraged by Poland's attempt to open up to Western values, culture and lifestyles in the 1970s. Unsurprisingly, the professional and consumer aspirations of the adolescent generation X grew, which is now reflected in their high awareness of market laws or social marketing techniques. And this is probably why this generation interprets the ageing human body as a social construct, influenced precisely by the laws of the marketplace. In other words, they see it as a target for the influence of image professionals. The reflections shared by the representatives of generation X seem to indicate that the interviewees are aware of the susceptibility of seniors to succumb to promoted models, e.g. in terms of

rejuvenating their appearance. It also seems that, in their opinion, not every senior has the ability to take care of themselves in such a way that it is a manifestation of a gradual transition from the previously developed (by tradition) image of the older persons to a more modern one. Because, as one of the narrators said,

it's such a generational change. This old age changes with every generation. Well, it changes with time, with technological progress. (F, 48, CITY)

And then there is generation Y, which interprets the ageing body of the modern senior as not fitting the stereotypical image of the older people, thus confirming the observations of previous generations about the improvement in the appearance of seniors. The youngest respondents have no doubt that such a positive change has taken place. It is interesting to note that these respondents were the only ones of all the generations surveyed to refer to the 'stereotypical' appearance of the older persons, which in fact no longer exists. Listening to the millennials' statements, one gets the impression that the absence of the stereotypical grandmother or grandfather evokes a note of sadness in the interviewees, which can be interpreted in terms of nostalgia for the past, for the somehow idyllic image of older people remembered from childhood. When asked about the different dimensions of old age, respondents repeatedly referred to the example of their own grandparents. This is understandable because, firstly, it is not uncommon for the oldest members of their families to still be alive and, secondly, the literature on the subject explains that family is one of the key values in the lives of generation Y people (Wątroba 2022: 101). Millennials have a special relationship with their parents and grandparents, for whom they are or were the apple of their eye. They are also keen to take advantage of the wisdom and experience of previous generations (Konieczna-Woźniak 2019) and are open to receiving support from them. It cannot be ruled out that a nostalgia for the idyllic memory of the older people, epitomised by grandparents, could be the reason for the millennials' criticism of activities aimed at halting the progressive ageing process, such as the use of aesthetic medicine. The interviewees disapproved of hiding old age or rejuvenating the appearance of the ageing body. There are limits to opening up to promoted patterns, and these relate to the visual side of ageing and the appearance of the ageing body.

6. Conclusion

The content presented in this study seems to do justice to the statement that the human body is a socio-cultural reality, an unfinished social phenomenon that is constantly subject to change. The body is a symbolic form that reflects the rules, social hierarchies and cultural obligations of a given society and historical moment.

The reflections of representatives of different generations on the appearance of the ageing human body show that the common point of the issues discussed is, on the one hand, the variability of social interpretations and expectations of the appearance of the ageing body and the practices undertaken in this regard, and, on the other hand, the individual approach to these social and cultural conditions.

Analysing the results of the study, it can be concluded that the way of defining the period of life that is old age correlates with the perception of the appearance of the ageing body. For the two oldest generations – the traditionalists and the baby boomers – the tangible experience of changes in the appearance and functioning of their own bodies naturally focused their attention on old age, while the youngest generation, who identified old age with externally observable changes, pointed to the absence of the ‘stereotypical’ looking older person, which seemed to cause their discomfort in this regard. Furthermore, it was found that the oldest respondents had a positive opinion of the appearance of the (sometimes rejuvenated) body of the contemporary senior, while the post-war boomers and millennials tended to favour the cautious adoption of such procedures, preferring the natural course of the ageing process of the human body. The analysis also shows that the retrospective reflection of generation X ended with the statement that old age is a time for wisdom. This does not mean, however, that seniors are not subject to the laws of the market and marketing, due to which the body of a modern senior is a target for image specialists. According to generation X, seniors are still developing the ability to “civilise” their bodies (Elias 1980: 176–197).

The intergenerational differences in the perception of the ageing body of contemporary older persons seem to convince us that the moment in life of the individual respondents, including the – more or less – ‘packed’ baggage of their life experiences, can determine the paths of interpretation of the phenomena described here. The use of generational categories helps to capture social constructivism in this respect.

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