Visibly ageing femininities: women’s visual discourses of being over-40 and over-50 on Instagram

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Visibly ageing femininities: women’s visual discourses of being over-40 and over-50 on Instagram

Katrin Tiidenberg

*School of Communication and Culture-Information Science, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark; *Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication School, Institute of Social Studies, Tallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia

**ABSTRACT**

This article explores visual discourses about over-40 and over-50 femininities that emerge from women’s own Instagram accounts. It analyses women’s visual and textual rhetoric of what over-40 and over-50 looks like, and whether it could interrupt the ageist, sexist, and body-normative discourses of female ageing and visibility. Intertextual visual discourse analysis of images, captions, and hashtags reveals two dominant themes (fitness and fashion) and two repeating rhetorical elements (motherhood and self-sufficiency) through which women make themselves visible as over-40/50. A few explicitly subversive discourses (i.e., over-40 *fatshion* account) exist, but a discourse of a healthy, fit, fashionable, independent, self-sufficient, and happy mother over-40/50 is prevalent. It easily lends itself to being interpreted as an insidious reproduction of post-feminist ideology, but I argue that there are moments of critique and subversion within. Thus, a reparative reading that acknowledges moments of disconnect from the discourse that normalizes ageing women’s limited or non-existent visibility is offered.

**Introduction**

The ageism, sexism, and ableism of global visual economy (Rosalind Gill 2008) is neither news, nor a surprise. There are some examples where the normalization of thinness and youth as only parameters of female worth are being ridiculed in popular culture, and flashes of alternative visions in the fashion and beauty industry, but feminist scholars are cautious about reading this as a considerable shift in visual discourse (cf. Dara P. Murray 2012, or Rosalind Gill and Ana S. Elias 2014). Some ageing femininities seem to be celebrated (or perhaps fetishized) in fashion, blogs, or film. But Deborah Jermy (2016, 586) interprets the occasional inclusion of ageing celebrities with abundant cultural capital (i.e., Joan Didion, Joni Mitchell, Helen Mirren) as a “cynical attempt at edginess” that highlights, rather than subverts, the fact that the industry holds women’s sexual subjecthood hostage to costly products and procedures from the age of 30 onwards. While scholars have long noted that we understand the “natural” physiological changes of the ageing body through the cultural framework that gives them meaning (Margaret M. Gullette 1997; Mike Hepworth and Mike © 2017 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

**KEYWORDS**

Ageing femininities; Instagram; selfies; social media; ageing women’s visibility

**CONTACT**

Katrin Tiidenberg katrin.tiidenberg@gmail.com

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Featherstone (1982), these meanings tend to take on a life of their own. They lead to women’s bodies being managed through toxic, demeaning labels like “MILF” and “cougar” for those whose bodies meet the standards of inducing a hetero-sexual desire-reaction in an average man, and “soccer-mom” or “granny” for the truly invisible ones, whose bodies do not.

Ageing women’s bodies exist in a dialectic of being invisible and hypervisible (Kath Woodward 1991, xvi). Women are bombarded with ideals of staying young forever, getting older without signs of ageing, or “stopping the clock” (Peter Öberg 2003, 103–104), yet self-presenting in a too “youthful” manner is deemed inappropriate (Julia Twigg 2007) and trolling or shaming visibly ageing women is still the norm in many spaces online (Kristyn Gorton and Joanne Garde-Hansen 2013). Mature women, despite making up a significant consumer group, continue to be invisible and desexualized in the majority of marketing discourses, which prefer a Photoshopped image of a supernaturally ageless celebrity or a tub of moisturizer over an image of a woman who actually looks 50 or over (Denise C. Lewis, Kataline Medvedev, and Desiree M. Seponski 2011).

With the pressures outlined above, it seems surprising to find that some women choose to hashtag their own selfies with their age (#over40, #over50) on the image sharing application Instagram. We might ask: “Why would anyone do this within our toxic visual environment?” Or, “What other kinds of work do those hashtagging and photo sharing practices do?” This article builds on the premises of an ageist, hetero-, and body-normative visual culture outlined above, as well as the ubiquity of mediated visuals in today’s world (Nicholas Mirzoeff 2015) to explore the visual discourses of women over-40 and over-50 that emerge from women’s own social media accounts. How is over-40 and over-50 presented in the streams of women’s Instagram selfies, and are there elements within that can be seen as subverting the normalization of “middle-ageism” (Gullette 1997, 3)?

Social media, selfies, and subversion

Women’s self-presentation on social media, particularly through selfies, is commonly met with diagnoses of narcissism and other shaming discourses (cf. Anne Burns 2015). Some critical feminist scholarship raises sharp concerns of self-objectification and sexualization regarding women’s (self) representations (most of this work builds on Rosalind Gill 2007, 2008; but cf. Stephen R. Barnard 2016 for a recent account of objectification in selfies). This work often echoes an early Foucauldian (Michel Foucault 1977, 200) suspicion of visibility, wherein all increases in women’s gendered, embodied, and sexual visibility are seen as leading to objectification rather than increased agency, because of the existing structures of inequality. Recent critical feminist work also highlights the neoliberal, post-feminist discourse, which works with an ideal of a choice-making, pleasure seeking, powerful subject (Amy S. Dobson 2015). Post-feminism puts forth a “makeover” paradigm, which demands constant self-improvement (Gill 2007), which increasingly incorporates and coerces older women as well (Jermyn 2016). Jermyn (2016, 580) admits an ambiguity in whether the new trends celebrating ageing femininities (mentioned earlier) might signify a shift in older women’s visibility as attractive, but leans towards interpreting them as post-feminist pressure for prolonged appearance-related vigilance.

Alternatively, visibility is interpreted as giving (some) symbolic power. Kaja Silverman (1986, 139) challenges “the assumption that exhibitionism always implies woman’s subjugation to a controlling male gaze.” Others raise persuasive concerns for a more nuanced
treatment of visibility as a lived experience, pointing out the need to be aware of the “complex and multiple forms of pleasure and desire that characterize women’s attachment to feminine identities” (Debra Ferreday 2007) and question the popularity and pedigree of particular aesthetics, sensibilities, or practices, without collapsing our analyses into assumptions about practitioners’ lack of freedom (Feona Attwood 2010, 5). Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley (2015) found that dominant discourse seems to offer women only two conflicting and unsatisfying positions of visibility—post-feminist self-objectification versus joyless rejection of any sexiness. However, they argue that through everyday consumerist practices of sex toy consumption and concurrent construction of sex shop spaces, the women they studied find ways to “embody, rework, and resist dominant discourses of neoliberalism, postfeminism, and consumerism in ways that rupture passive modes of femininity” (Evans and Riley 2015, preface).

This means that women produce new sexual subject positions, which subvert existing normative expectations, albeit to be legible as subversive these have to repeat dominant discourses. In similar vein, Hannah McCann (2016) proposes that some expressions of femininity that might typically be considered reproductions of post-feminist ideals (i.e., Barbie-doll looks), might actually be queering femininity, as they trouble the boundaries of gender “normality” (i.e., upper and middle-class pastel toned “appropriately” feminine looks).

Looking specifically at whether socially mediated self-presentation can be a form of resistance, Magda Olszanowski (2014) found that feminist artists use creative tactics to circumvent Instagram’s hetero-normative practices of censoring their images, Jessa F. Lingel and danah boyd (2013) explored how extreme body modification practitioners build countercultures, and Bryce J. Renninger (2014) showed that people identifying as asexual construct counter-publics on social media. My own research (Katrin Tiidenberg 2014, 2015a) on Tumblr.com has also shown that in the particular socio-technical conditions of a NSFW community, sharing selfies becomes a practice of resisting body-, and hetero-normativity. Sharing and viewing selfies leads my participants to question the narrow standards of appearances, reject some consumerist aspects of visual economy that presume monetary gain from exhibition of bodies, and thus (re)claim control over the aesthetic of bodies (Katrin Tiidenberg and Edgar Gomez-Cruz 2015). I suggest selfie practices expand community members’ understanding of what is photographable and unphotographable (Pierre Bourdieu 1996) about (women’s) bodies. In particular, taking, editing, posting, and interacting around selfies allowed my mature female participants to disconnect themselves from the discourses that have normalized the un-photographability of ageing female bodies. Relying on the above-mentioned empirical work and on Michel Foucault (1996, 1997) for theorizing resistance, I presume that certain socially mediated spaces can indeed function as collaborative spaces of subversion. Foucault’s later writing on subversive spaces (1997) and critique as voluntary indocility (1996) points out that if spaces are governed by fewer pre-existing norms, or lack codes of conduct, people can disconnect from normalizing discourses, and localized resistance becomes possible (Mark Kingston 2009). Thus, I am interested in whether the women voluntarily adding an #over40 and #over50 hashtag to their Instagram posts can be interpreted as rejecting the discourses that normalize youth as the primary parameter of women’s visibility and attractiveness. Could an analysis that accounts for localized acts of disconnect and notices moments of voluntary vulnerability as critique offer a reparative (Eve K. Sedgwick [1997] 2002) reading of how women face the myriad tensions in their visual self-presentations?
Method and data

To study the visual discourses of womanhood over-40 and over-50 as presented in women’s own social media accounts, I started with searching Instagram® for publicly available content hashtagged with #over40 and #over50 using the Instagram Application Program Interface (API). The goal for using an API search was to familiarize myself with the commonness of these hashtags; their use, and use of any additional hashtags alongside.

My first searches during a week in October 2014 yielded 26 personal accounts by women, who regularly18 used #over40 and 6 who used #over50. I repeated the searches during one week in April 2015, October 2015, and April 2016. Many of the accounts as well as the overall number of people seemingly regularly using those hashtags stayed the same. To situate these numbers a little—when I searched for accounts that used pregnancy-related hashtags on Instagram during June 2014 for another study, I ended up with a corpus of 178 accounts, so regularly using age-related hashtags can be considered a relatively marginal practice. Relying on the hashtag use in the initial accounts, I expanded my searches with additional tags (e.g., #over40/50, #over40/50beauty, #over40/50fashion, #50isntdead).

My final corpus included 36 Instagram accounts that belonged to racially diverse women, who had created more than 50 posts and who regularly used age-related tag-words. The number of followers fluctuated wildly, from just 13 in one case, to nearly 10,000 in a couple of other cases. Most of these accounts had a significant (1000–3000), or fairly big (200–700) followings, which—paired with the low number of the accounts that fit my criteria—might indicate both interest in, and lack of content that speaks to these issues. Posts generated 30–100 likes (those with a larger following getting more) and usually a couple of comments (with the high score for comments being 10–12). The number of posts per account ranged from 200 to 3000, but many of the accounts seemed to have 1000–2000 posts.

I analyzed my data contextually—this means I treat visual material (images, videos, many of which are selfies), textual material (captions, comments, profile descriptions), and hypertextual material (hashtags) as intertextually relational. I rely on the logic of visual discourse analysis as proposed by Gillian Rose (2001, 135–163). This means I started with immersing myself in the 36 accounts, conducting a deep read of the streams of posts (each post consists of an image, hashtags, very often a textual caption, and more often than not a string of comments). I then searched for key themes in the accounts, and patterns among those themes. I looked for key visual and textual elements that repeat in different themed accounts, and the rhetorical functions of those repetitive elements in building a discourse of over-40/50 visibility. I paid attention to how visual, textual, and hypertextual rhetoric was used by women to make truth claims, and blend, mix, or reject elements from visual economy’s dominant discourse. In the latter I move between what Sedgwick ([1997] 2002) calls reparative and paranoid stances, to avoid flattening interpretations of women’s rhetoric.

Out of ethical considerations I do not reference account URLs, names, nor reproduce any images. I have edited out very specific hashtags or hashtags that reference the poster’s name. I substituted other people’s account names with references to relationships (e.g., @boyfriend). I cite accounts with large following, assuming they are less likely to perceive them as private space despite the technological publicness.

Finally, it is important to note that my corpus is based on public personal accounts that use hashtags, thus I do not claim to speak for all depictions of over40/50 womanhood on Instagram let alone off. It is likely that other women have private accounts, or public accounts, where they simply do not use hashtags. It is possible that including these accounts would
have shown a wider range of themes and discursive elements than those I present, but hashtagging enters content into attention economy (Alice Marwick 2015) and makes it expressly visible as part of the over-40/50 discourse, in ways that private or non-hashtagged accounts do not.

**Discussion of results**

I saw two dominant themes in the initial corpus of 36 accounts—fitness and fashion. All of the accounts, like most other personal accounts on Instagram, post a mix of content from trips and meals, to friends and selfies. What I call the dominant theme is what the account owner posts about regularly and repetitively, in particular in terms of the posts that are tagged with age-related hashtags. While some women add an age-related hashtag to all or most of their posts, many do not, only using them with selfies, or based on some harder-to-guess personal logic.

Accounts with the dominant theme of fitness often document weight loss and/or exercise-driven lifestyle. This framing starts in the profile descriptions, but continues through images, captions, and hashtags. For example, “Linda. 44 yo. Law Enforcement Lieutenant. 65 lbs fat loss. Fitness freak. Hater of aspartame & whiners. Love my pets. Love @boyfriend.” Weight-loss is almost entirely framed through health and lifestyle. There are some references to “bikini bodies,” but the overall rhetoric is neither that of pursuing a youthful, sexier, or thinner body, nor that of express body-positivity.11 Rather it is a rhetoric of working hard, but being healthier and happier for it. It is a rhetoric of a better life via fitness.

Accounts with the dominant theme of fashion focus on documenting and showcasing outfits (i.e., the OOTD12 selfies), brands, and the attractively made-up face. Similarly to exercise, diet, and protein shakes in fitness accounts, fashionable clothes, accessories, and make-up are framed through feeling good and being happy. Women construe fashion posts through the rhetoric of joy from, and love for fashion, and a consumerist celebration of shopping.

Both, stylish appearance and fitness are positioned as something that involves an effort that is more confusing after 40 or 50, so advice or inspiration is offered to others. For example, “Sylvia, I’m a career-mom of two, but I try to maintain a sense of style, glamour and fun in my 40’s. Maybe you can find some inspiration here.” This highlighting of the skill and effort can be an internalization of what Twigg (2007) called the inappropriateness of self-presenting in too youthful of a manner. The tacit assumption seems to be that clothes need to be scrutinized with particular care now that the woman is over-40/50.

Fitness images are often of exercising or in the gym, but before-and-after collages that bring a pre-weight-loss figure into the same frame with a work-in-progress or goal-reached figure are also popular. Visually, the rhetoric is that of hard-earned, sweaty transformation of the body that the accompanying text links with increasing levels of happiness and thus transformations of the self. Estella Tincknell (2011) has likened the fetishization of bodily suffering (e.g., pain of cosmetic surgery) in makeover TV shows13 to spiritual redemption via abjection. The valorization of sweat in fitness posts could serve the same function. More directly, the sweaty selfie and the before/after collages make visual truth claims. They offer “proof” of being committed to the lifestyle, thus scaffolding the poster’s right to talk, be seen, and inspire. It also categorizes and creates differences, signaling that the poster belongs to a select community of people, who have found the strength of will to radically change
their lifestyle. The focus of these images is on the body or a body part, but the fitness-lingo of reps, squats, and glute-days masks or shifts the focus of express sexualization that a close-up of a scantily clad mound of firm flesh might invite.

Fashion selfies are similarly generic—outstretched arm selfies, collages that highlight accessories; full-length images of the person striking a pose. The focus of these images is on clothes, and through that the body, but contrary to fitness posts, acknowledgement of any effort behind maintaining a slender body (with a few notable exceptions discussed later, fashion themed account holders are all slim) is almost entirely absent. The unapologetically consumerist and latently classed discourse is framed through joy from being (able to look) cool/beautiful/stylish after-40/50.

Beyond there being significantly fewer explicitly over-50 accounts, there are very few differences in how over-40 and over-50 accounts present fitness and fashion themes. One notable exception is the use of the word “ageing.” It is absent from the over-40 accounts, but used to speak of “healthy ageing” and more significantly “defying ageing” in the over-50 ones. This coincides with the overall cultural ideal of getting older without showing signs of it (Öberg 2003), which is accomplished by erasure of the word itself in over-40 accounts, and through tips on how to erase its physical signs in over-50 ones. It might be worth asking here, whether this difference reflects a wider societal belief that it is not plausible to be worthy of visibility after-50 without acknowledging one’s effort in, and attention to, signs of ageing.

Repetitive visual and textual elements and their rhetorical work

In addition to the two above-mentioned themes, there were two rhetorical elements repeating through accounts, including across fashion and fitness themes. These were motherhood and self-sufficiency. It is not unusual for women to point out their status as a mother (or a grandmother) already in their profile descriptions, and there are mothering-related posts in the corpus, where women post pictures of their kids, and write about them in captions. Motherhood however, was not presented as regularly, consistently, or intensively as fitness or fashion, which is why I am not interpreting it as a third theme. Interestingly, posts directly pertaining to mothering did not usually include age-related hashtags, whereas in other posts where age is marked, motherhood is often invoked through (and only through) hashtags. This means that age-marked selfies, and gym- or outfit images that seemingly had nothing to do with motherhood, were still linked to mothering through #mom, #grandmom, #fitmom, #busymom, or #coolmom. The caption in Figure 1 came with a selfie of a close-up of a made-up face, where there are no visible references to, or an immediately discernable need for a reference of motherhood (most of the hashtags reference cosmetics brands).

Motherhood, if enacted within the socially accepted standards, enhances women’s social capital, so referencing it in posts where it is seemingly irrelevant, but where women have chosen to indicate their age, can function to emphasize a social status that translates to a right to speak, and thus buffers the social precariousness of making oneself visible as over-40/50 in a culture that does not want to see it. The lack of age-hashtags in mothering posts can be interpreted as these women creating a particular discourse of visible ageing femininity, which unfixes itself from the conventional discourse that primarily sees women after a certain age through their caretaking roles.
The second repetitive rhetorical element similarly spread throughout is emphasized self-sufficiency. It is accomplished by references to self-love, self-confidence, focusing on being happy and finding that all in oneself. The repetition of this rhetoric can be found in profile descriptions like “45 and just getting started” or “health and happiness, because life is too short for anything else.” It is reinforced through captions and hashtags in mostly selfie posts, both in accounts by women over-40 and over-50. Hashtags and captions co-create a rhetoric of positive emotions (#happy), confident attitude (I’m living my best life, #famousousover40), and a position of guidance via advice given in imperative speech (#loveyourself, #changenow). For example, the caption in Figure 2 was posted with a close-up selfie of a smiling woman with cascading hair filling most of the frame. Being positive and carefree is

**Figure 1.** Caption to a selfie.

26 likes

#happy #hump day !!! #carpics #fotd# #makeuplook #maccosmetics #brownscript #ricepaper #deepdamson #milanicosmetics #teal used brushes by #rccosmetics #mom #overforty #fergaluscious on the pout by #wetnwild #fergiecollection #rva

**Figure 2.** Caption to a selfie 2.

66 likes

Be Happy 😊 Staying Positive #behappy #smile #itsallaboutthehair #itsallaboutthehair #hesmybiggestfan #ilovehim #hair #beauty #over50 #becoming #taken5minutesago #instapic #stayingpositive #almost55 #nomakeup #nocares
emphasized in both the caption text and hashtags, and there is an additional nod towards a “work in progress” selfhood in the “becoming” hashtag (it originally included the woman’s name, which I deleted). While fitness accounts often make explicit their makeover (Gill 2007) approach to bodies, and link those to happiness, this happens less explicitly in the fashion theme, but is brought in via the element of self-sufficiency.

This rhetoric of demonstrative self-love can be viewed through Gill and Elias’ (2014) framing of how some discourses of loving your body may actually be burdening women with an additional task of normative self-confidence, and through that merely represent a reproduction of a post-feminist ideal of a powerful, pleasure-seeking woman as well as the internalization of the neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility. Yet, the rhetorical element of positivity and self-sufficiency may serve as a defense from accusations of vanity, narcissism, or undignified ageing, which middle-aged celebrities are constantly trolled with online (Gorton and Garde-Hansen 2013). Perhaps it also functions to make normatively un-feminine things like heavy weightlifting more palatable. Whether one commits to the reparative or the paranoid reading, the rhetorical power of being visible as over-40/50 and as someone with joie de vivre needs to be acknowledged within the overall visual discourse.

Looking specifically at which visual elements repeat through posts that mention age, I noticed that it is the selfies and other body-related images, and not the images of trips, friends, nature, or pets. The body is framed through age. However, the aesthetics and rhetorical functions of the repetitive visuals are noticeably different across fashion and fitness themes, as illustrated in Table 1.

Thus a visual element of similar portions of the body (i.e., a face selfie or a mirror selfie) communicates differently through different use of aesthetics and rhetoric. In the accounts with the dominant theme of fitness, images cite the fitness-selfie genre rules that require self-presentation to be serious and determined (Bent Fausing 2014, 3), while fashion selfies follow the genre rules of OOTD images that emulate fashion spreads in glamor magazines, as well as (micro)celebrities (Marwick 2015) and Influencers (Crystal Abidin 2016) on Instagram. Images function as truth claims by lending genre-specific authenticity (she really is fit enough, she really is fashionable enough, she knows how to do this on Instagram). Visually, both fitness and fashion accounts focus on successes—unchanging numbers on the scale, collapsing yoga poses, or unflattering outfits are not shown, albeit sweat and its connotation of effort is emphasized in the fitness discourse.

Discursive functions of combining hashtags

Women whose content I observed use many different hashtags. I want to briefly explore the discursive functions of combining and blending hashtags in a single post. Figure 3 is an example of the caption and the hashtags that accompany a selfie (in exercise clothes).

I interpret the hashtag combination, especially in the context of the caption, as having emphasizing, identifying, and rallying metacommunicative functions (Daer et al. 2014). The poster identifies as a member of certain categories (i.e., an over-40-year-old woman, a mother, a lifter, a person who gives advice); rallies other people to get fit; and emphasizes that it is a worthy and moral effort (#fightforit, #earnit, #doitforthekids). The combination of these hashtags into a single post constructs (and this functions on the level of hashtags alone, but is amplified through intertextuality with the caption and the image) a particular
| Table 1. The aesthetics and rhetorical functions of repetitive visuals in fashion and fitness themes. |

<table>
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<th></th>
<th><strong>fitness</strong></th>
<th><strong>fashion</strong></th>
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| close-up selfie     | **aesthetic**: sweaty, serious faced, indicative of a "bad-ass" attitude (i.e., hood up, no smile)  
                       **rhetoric**: commitment to the lifestyle evident in ignoring conventional selfie-rules of searching for the best light, best angle, and putting on a pleasant facial expression. Makes the overall discourse more persuasive because offers proof of hard work | **aesthetic**: carefully put-together, pretty, made-up  
                       **rhetoric**: proof of ability to look ageless and/or similar to women in advertising. Makes the overall discourse more persuasive, because offers proof that the woman has the corporeal/cultural capital to justify an interest in beauty/fashion |
| standing mirror selfie | **aesthetic**: a powerful, almost masculine fitness pose—legs spread, muscles flexed, emphasis on strength. Background usually of gym, big grin  
                       **rhetoric**: evidence of, and pride over bodily transformation, demonstration of a powerful body in its "natural habitat." Fit body and gym surroundings function as a truth claim | **aesthetic**: "modeling" pose—slight twist of the body to the side, hip tilt, feet together, toes apart, a modest smile  
                       **rhetoric**: focus on the outfit, demonstration of the skills to reproduce the same facial and bodily expression day to day, to show different outfits without detracting attention from them. Indication of the vast amount of clothes functions as a truth claim |
| action shot          | **aesthetic**: awe-inspiring, dynamic. The woman is usually holding a difficult exercise pose, muscles straining, but the clothes are bright, there is no visible sweat and the lighting is bright  
                       **rhetoric**: mastery, focus on results not the hardship. Functions as truth claim by proving skill and showing results of the effort rhetoric that is added via captions and hashtags | **aesthetic**: dynamic, effortless, happy. The woman is smiling in an office or in front of a store, often flying  
                       **rhetoric**: the ability (financial, corporeal, skillful, social) to "do it all and look good." Emphasis on effortlessness and making a truth claim via situating the outfit in a social setting viewers will recognize |
| image of a subculturally relevant item | **aesthetic**: gritty, utilitarian (poorly lit images of protein powder tubs, barbells, gym machinery screens that show accomplishment)  
                       **rhetoric**: proof of authenticity, proof of fitness knowhow | **aesthetic**: highly stylized, pretty (close-ups of accessories, bags, shoes). Glossy magazines are emulated  
                       **rhetoric**: proof of authenticity as a fashion lover, and a fashion-Instagrammer via citation of genre rules |
way of being over-40. In it, motherhood and hard work are emphasized, responsibility for own happiness is taken, belonging to specific fitness communities is marked, and the body-self is positioned as a “work in progress” (#foreverfat). Hashtag combinations do similarly nuanced metacommunicative work in fashion accounts, but instead of hard work usually emphasize fabulousness and effortlessness (#over40andfabulous).

There is a noticeable redundancy in some hashtag categories. Hashtagging makes content searchable and enters it into the attention economy thus this redundancy (i.e., using #workoutathome, #homeworkout, and #athomeworkout in the same post) speaks to a conscious desire to make content findable, and to gain attention. This may be done for a sense of community, for making connections, or as aspirational (Brooke E. Duffy 2015) towards one day monetizing one’s follower base.
Resistance?

Can the rhetorical elements employed in the accounts described above be considered a resistant or subversive discourse of being an over-40/50 woman? What does resisting ageism and sexism of visual economy even look like? As Julia Twigg (2004, 63) has pointed out, the obvious feminist response would be to say it attempts resisting the devaluation of being old, while not denying age as such.

In simplest terms, these conditions appear to be met by women, who voluntarily indicate their age while posting images of their faces and bodies on public Instagram accounts. But noticing the pattern that it is primarily the demonstrations of fitness, or outfits that indications of age are attached to, and reading this alongside the self-congratulatory hashtags of #40andfabulous or #fit50, as well as comments like “OMG 50?! Gorgeous!”—it is easy to dismiss this as a discourse of “looking good for 40/50” not “I am 40/50, this is what I look like, and it’s fine.” This begs the question of whether the condition of neither defying nor devaluing age is really met, or if this discourse is rather a post-feminist makeover (Gill 2007) of “ageing itself and representations of it” (Jermyn 2016, 576).

However, there were a few accounts in my corpus that use age-related hashtags, make their bodies publicly visible, and do not meet the visual economy’s narrow standards nor show remorse about the fact. The following is a profile description and a fairly typical caption to a full body image from a plus-size fashion or fatshion account. The woman identifies as over-40, her body is outside of the visual economy’s parameters of photographable (Bourdieu 1996), and yet she does not hide it or her age (Figure 4). Is this resistance?

Her hashtag combinations do the metacommunicative work of entering her content into Instagram’s attention economy by identifying her as a member of certain consumer and Instagram-specific groups (i.e., by marking brands). But they also rally people behind the cause of body positivity (#allbodiesaregoodbodies, #bodypositivity). She positions her content as explicitly subversive by using an aggressive tone (eff your beauty standards). Both of these practices she seems to have gradually grown in to. Going back to the beginning of her account, she only hashtagged the brands of clothes. Gradually affirmative hashtags like
#ifeelbeautiful appeared, and only after that both plus size and age-related hashtags started getting included.

Yet, only seeing resistance in those expressly over-40/50 female bodies that fall outside of visual economy’s appearance standards while discarding all others by way of their visibility merely reproducing existing hierarchies is at best, flattening. It saddles women with super-imposed conformity (Jack Halberstam 2012, 82), and becomes a paranoid application of the passive femininity frame, which leaves no room for reparatively noticing how women may rework or resist dominant discourses (Evans and Riley 2015).

Looking at moments of disconnect from normalizing discourses through Foucault’s conception of resistance as critique or “voluntary inservitude” (1996, 386) might be able to bridge what is otherwise shaping up to be a standard feminist impasse between women as dupes and overly enthusiastic celebrations of change.

Choosing to here employ a reparative position, which as Sedgwick ([1997] 2002) writes, operationalizes surprise and hope, allows me to re-assess the subversive potential of the over-40/50 discourse that emerged from the studied Instagram accounts. By choosing to approach the content with “critical love” (Susan Crozier 2008), this reading argues that what women present on Instagram offers limited, localized subversions to visual economy’s social imaginary of mature women. The discourse of over-40/50 womanhood on Instagram thus:

- rejects the normalization of the overall invisibility of women above a certain age by simply being publicly present as over-40/50;
- rejects the expected dissolution of the corporeal into a social role of caretaker after a certain age, by demonstrating passion for things other than cooking and mothering, yet without dismissing those as irrelevant;
- claims a fit, well-dressed mature body while rejecting both the widely circulated frumpy, saggy mom-bod, and the oversexed MILF/cougar subject position. While the visual elements in some posts (in particular in fitness thematic accounts) could be interpreted as self-objectifying from the paranoid perspective, the textual and hypertextual rhetoric of those posts frames bodies and their parts as matters of health, happiness, and lifestyle, which at minimum deserves to be accounted for;
- normalizes the rhetoric of being pleased with being over-40/50 or pleased with oneself at over-40/50 by creating, reproducing, and circulating blended hashtags like #50feelsgood or #over40fabulous. This reinforces the message by inviting hashtag searchers and emulation.

**Conclusion**

The over-40/50 discourse in women’s own Instagram accounts seems to reflect the dialectical tension of both embodying and reworking the sexist and ageist (Gill 2008) ideals of women’s (in)visibility (Woodward 1991) and (un)photographability (Bourdieu 1996) after a certain age. It rejects ageing femininities’ invisibility, de-sexualization, and reduction to caretaking roles (Lewis, Medvedev, and Seaponski 2011), while operating with a rhetoric that frames feminine visibility through fitness, fashion, mothering, and self-confidence, which reinforce what Jermyn (2016) considers a makeover of ageing in ways that extend post-feminism’s (Gill 2007) coercive power over women’s lives. However, a reparative reading (Sedgwick [1997] 2002) reveals a patchwork of rhetorical elements that do not uniformly reproduce
post-feminist, consumerist, and neoliberal ideals. Conventionally unfeminine practices such as weightlifting, and conventionally unfeminine aesthetics of sweat and grit are incorporated into women’s self-presentations. Metacommunicative, yet machine searchable blended hashtags that emphasize pride, self-satisfaction, and self-sufficiency after 40/50 are coined, creating, articulating, and circulating a celebratory rhetoric of over-40/50 visibility. While there are occasions or aspirations of monetization—and fashion themed accounts celebrate consuming conspicuously—most of the content offers guidance or inspiration free of charge, thus pushing back against the neoliberal, consumerist discourses, instead constructing a collaborative, DIY one. Granted, these moments of refusing normalized versions of ageing femininities—the reparative or paranoid interpretations of which can be argued over—are minor, yet the significance of the existence of a non-trolling, non-pornographic, self-authored hashtag discourse for over-40/50 female visibility needs to be acknowledged.

Finally, I want to address another paradox of sorts. Instagram, which many scholars have shown to be particularly suited for hegemonic self-expression (Tiidenberg 2015b) and self-conspicuousness (Abidin 2016) seems to, in the case of the over-40/50 female visibility discourse, carry certain traits of a space of subversion (Foucault 1997). It seems that in as far as self-presentation of ageing femininities is concerned, Instagram’s burgeoning (micro) celebrity and conspicuous consumption culture (Marwick 2015, 139) creates a space that is governed by fewer pre-existing norms of visibility. This may allow previously unseen groups and individuals to play with or aspire towards visibility. This affords self-conspicuousness and visibility (Abidin 2016) to microcelebrity, Influencers, and aspiring Influencers, but also to other previously invisible groups, among them middle-aged women. In a sense then, and with a sensation of reparative surprise, I would finish by echoing McCann’s (2016, 250) suggestion that we may be systematically overlooking sites of resistance, because they appear “like the very thing we assume we ought to rail against.” Instagram, surprisingly enough, might function as a space that normalizes conspicuous (young) femininities, while opening up a previously non-existent space within the visual economy for middle-aged women.

Notes

1. See Amy Schumer’s skit on Julia Louis Dreyfuss “Last fuckable day” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDz2kcjWpOs.
3. It has been noted that the MILF (acronym for Mother I’d Like to Fuck) label seems to be moving up in age. While in popular discourse MILF is a label for fit 30–50-year-old women (Wikipedia), it has been noted that in the porn industry it applies to women as young as 25 (Aurora Snow 2010).
4. Hashtags are “user-generated” (as opposed to created by platforms) descriptive annotations (Michele Zappavigna 2015). Hashtagging makes social media content searchable (generates machine-readable categories), but it is also used for the “distinctly rhetorical practice” of metacommunication (Alice R. Daer, Rebecca Hoffman, and Seth Goodman 2014, 2).
5. Not Safe For Work, mostly means sexually explicit content.
6. Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 6–7) wrote that people’s photographic practices are governed by, and indicative of collective rules, class values, and social norms. Thus, what people deem photographable (what they take pictures of) expresses the shared norms in their society. I use photographability and un-photographability throughout the article to indicate apparent social norms about what is and what is not suited for, or worthy of capturing.
7. Sedgwick ([1997] 2002) proposed a framework of reparative and paranoid hermeneutics. She saw the latter dominating a lot of queer and feminist writing, to the extent where “to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant” (Sedgwick [1997] 2002, 126). Paranoid thinking is anticipatory, imitation based, generalizing, and functions as a strong theory of negative affect all leading up to triumphant uncovering of false consciousness, whereas reparative readings accept partial perspectives, and are open to surprise and consequently, hope (Sedgwick [1997] 2002).

8. Instagram is an image- and video-sharing, smartphone-based social networking platform launched in 2010 and sold to Facebook for $1 billion in 2012. By June 2016 Instagram had 500 million active users, 300 million of whom use the app every day (Instagram Blog, 2016). The bulk of images shared on Instagram are simple snapshots of everyday things.

9. I used a custom tool for which I thank Dr Gregory Minton.

10. An age-related hashtag has to be used at least 10 times for the account to be included in the corpus.


12. Acronym for Outfit of the Day, a popular style of selfies or selfie collages, that showcase an outfit and list its elements (often with brand precision).

13. Ten Years Younger is a UK makeover show aired on Channel 4, where participants are given a complete makeover, partially through plastic surgery.

14. Or motivational poster type images.

15. A neologism that combines fat and fashion.

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Notes on contributor
Katrin Tiidenberg is Associate Professor of Social Media and Visual Culture at the Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication School of Tallinn University, Estonia and a post-doctoral researcher at Aarhus University, Denmark. She is currently publishing on selfie culture and visual research methods. Her research interests include ethics, sexuality, gender, and normative ideologies as mediated through social media practices and visual culture. E-mail: katrin.tiidenberg@gmail.com

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