

Gray Matters: Aging in the Age of #grannyhair

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on previous literature in cultural gerontology, ageism and age relations, and cultural appropriation this study analyzes the recent grannyhair trend on instagram. Recently, younger women have been coloring their hair combinations of white, silver, and gray and posting images of their style on instagram with the #grannyhair designation. In this study we use an intersectional approach to age and gender relations to explore this phenomenon. Previous studies show that women's behaviors and presentations of aging are policed by cultural standards of age-appropriate appearance and performance, particularly in regards to their hair. Qualitative content analysis of #grannyhair images are examined to assess the extent of age-based stereotypes and policing of age-appropriate behavior and appearance. This study found that instagram users engaged in this trend did not challenge age relations. Rather, boundaries of age-appropriate behaviors enacted in the #grannyhair trend are largely set by younger users. The ways in which young users utilize ageist stereotypes as a way to emphasize the contrast between their stylistic choices and their status as young attractive women framed the #grannyhair trend as one of appropriation. That is, young women adopted gray, white, and silver hair as a cultural symbol and changed its original meaning as a marker of old age. Conversations among both young and old instagram users echoing previous literature that details the contentious relationships old women have with their aging bodies, and hair specifically.

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### **General Audience Abstract**

Recently, young women have been coloring their hair combinations of white, silver, and gray and posting images of their style on Instagram with the #grannyhair designation. As this trend gained popularity, there has been some speculation as to what this trend could mean for old women and their attitudes towards and experiences of their own hair turning white or gray. While some news sites have speculated that this trend represents a celebration of old women's appearances, this study finds that while both young and old women participate in this trend, they discuss it in different ways that do not challenge ageist attitudes or negative stereotypes of old women. For young women, this style is not about celebrating or valuing old age, and they engage in this trend through making jokes that make clear that they are not old, and that old is still a devalued category. Old women either clearly stated that the trend was odd because looking old is clearly bad (as it comes with a decrease in status) or talked about giving in to the inevitability of gray hair. As such, old women are now faced with either adhering to the new standards of white or gray hair, or face further social exclusion and invisibility.

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## Chapter 1: Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework

Drawing on the framework in West and Zimmerman's (1987), Cheryl Laz extends the notion of a doing gender to doing age. Like gender, aging must be accomplished within a social context of a culture from which meaning is derived. "We all accomplish age; we perform our own age constantly, but we also give meaning to other ages and to age in general in our actions and interactions, our beliefs and words and feelings, and our social policies" (Laz 2003 505-506). Appearance is a key factor in the embodiment of this performance (Laz 2003:514).

Like gender, we use age categories to set aside some groups for unequal treatment. In this instance, ageism affects those who are judged as old (Bytheway 2005). This is illustrated in a description of the reactions of two prominent women that were outed as "old" at surprise birthday parties: "both women...felt humiliated: 'tortured' and 'astonished' by the experience of these celebrations. [One woman] felt she was being forcibly retired from important areas of her life and that her friends wanted to distance themselves from her" (Bytheway 2005:364). The point is not that chronological age is used, but that designating someone as old results in a drop in their status in the context of age inequalities. Chronological age is only one of the ways that we use to mark someone as old. We also consider the body in terms of physical appearance, abilities, and so on to categorize people into the 'old age' group (Calasanti and Slevin 2001).

Considering age as a performance, it is one that can be done successfully and in accordance with widely accepted social scripts. Further, a successful age performance is mediated by the intersection of various other social locations (Calasanti and King 2015).

Consistent with Gilleard and Higgs (2015) argument that age is now understood as a performative embodiment that supplants the importance of chronological age, ageing successfully paradoxically compels older people to, essentially, not age, especially in terms of appearance. Ageing successfully then, is not a way to celebrate age and challenge ageism, but rather ageism becomes “displaced redefined, and perhaps intensified. Instead of accruing to chronological age, ageist exclusion is based on proximity to the successful aging paradigm. The ‘unsuccessful’ agers are those that look old” (Calasanti 2015:7). Further, with the idea that age can be successfully performed, the onus is on the individual to avoid discrimination through a successful performance: “the emphasis on individual control justifie[s] ageism” (7).

As interaction with others increasingly occurs online, we are presented the opportunity to negotiate and manipulate identity and appearance (Hine 2000). As such, our digital culture allows for the presentation of ourselves as younger than we might appear face-to-face (Katz and Marshall 2003). As we are afforded this flexibility to present ourselves in a way that allows us to avoid being judged as old, measures of chronological age can expose older adults to incidents of othering and discrimination.

### **Ageism, Age Relations, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Level of Ageism**

The oft-cited definition of ageism by Butler (1975) likens discrimination and stereotyping based on age to that of discrimination and stereotyping based on race and sex. Bytheway combines this definition with Comfort’s 1977 work, whose definition rests in bureaucratically defined chronological age groups, to describe ageism as “...rooted in the social *identity* of the individual, both a bureaucratically managed

identity and an identity conveyed by the physical appearance of the body” (Bytheway 2005:362).

Calasanti and Slevin (2001) extend this foundation to a systemic level: “Ageism is more than the attitudes and beliefs held by individuals in a particular society; it is also embedded in patterns of behavior and serves as a social organizing principle. Further, ageism takes new forms over time” (19). Age relations then, as embedded in this systemic exclusionary behavior, relies on power relations similar to race and gender: “the concept of *age* relations conveys the ways that age serves as a social organizing principle such that different age categories gain identities and power in relation to one another” (Calasanti 2015:3). Continuing Butler’s (1975) comparison of racism and ageism, Calasanti and Slevin (2001) also extend the concept of “color-blind racism” to “age-blindness” wherein age-blind people “expend much effort demonstrating that old people are acceptable because they are much like young(er) people. The sort of ageism in which we try to turn blind eye to the social realities of aging is akin to saying that women are actually OK because they are really like men, or that Black Americans are acceptable because they are really like Whites” (46). Calasanti (2008) also discusses this as part of a broader second or “deeper” level of ageism that is embedded in age relations. This second level of ageism included age-blindness and other sorts of comments that reaffirm the valuation of youth and the devaluation of old age. That is, if the compliment is only complimentary in that it separates a person from a group or status, such as old people, the compliment serves to reinforce the negative perception of the group.

The concept of age relations emerges as a framework for understanding such systemic exclusionary behaviors, power relations, and inequalities based on age

(Calasanti 2015). Much like racism and sexism, we all (as a society) participate in this system of othering; even though it may sometimes be veiled in normalized behaviors or even compliments that still strengthen the assumptions of old age as undesirable.

Manifestations of the age-blind culture as described by Calasanti and Slevin (2001) include patronizing language and infantilization directed at older adults (Nelson 2005), and harder to see, but equally ageist, compliments such as “oh, you look so young for your age.” These second level ageist expressions all reflect ageism.

### **Gender and Aging Bodies**

Age performance is an embodied, gendered process. As we age, the pressure to perform appropriately as an aged person intersects with the pressure to also perform appropriately as woman or man, particularly in terms of appearance. Thus, gender relations mold the performance embodied by an aged woman: the intersection of ageism and sexism create a confluence of burdens that affect women’s performance of age differently than men’s (Calasanti and Slevin 2001:54). That women and men experience pressures to perform age differently emerges in several studies, which show that women experience ageism rooted in the value placed on their attractiveness, and men experience ageism based in perceptions of declining physical ability and economic stability. Further, not only do men concern themselves less with their attractiveness than women, but they also maintain higher self-esteem as they age than do women (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko 2011:497).

This attention to appearance and attractiveness, however, comes with a system of restrictions on what a suitable amount attention to appearance is. This suitable amount of attention exists in the space between ideas of health-consciousness and frivolity, as

outlined by Tanner, Maher, and Fraser (2013), who discuss this space as a dynamic “complicated and mobile border between vanity as proper health-conscious self regard and potentially feminine and frivolous that subtends discourses of women’s ageing” (109). In addition to the conflation between beauty and health, anti-ageing discourse has also perpetuated the idea that “the display of ‘bad ageing’ has become... deviant to strongly held ideas about social and moral good” (Benbow-Buitenhuis 2014:46). Additionally, yielding to these pressures to maintain a well-kept appearance with a focus on youthful feminine aesthetics reifies ageist beliefs and devaluation of ageing women. This is illuminated in Clark and Griffin’s (2008) series of interviews with women using beauty work in response to ageism:

Indeed, the women’s narratives concerning their experiences of ageism were rife with the perception of being invisible, although this term was defined both in terms of social realities and physicality...the possession of an aged appearance resulted in a lack of recognition, opportunities, and resources based on others’ perceptions of the women’s chronological ages and concomitant social value...as their bodies increasingly deviated from cultural beauty ideals (669).

The negotiation of the boundaries around this “appropriate” attention to appearance then obligates women to an understanding of a gendered age performance as it intersects with other social locations, like race and class:

Women require *knowledge* of what is appropriate, they require *skill* in order to achieve their goals and they must also be able to engage in a *performance*, which displays the achievement of appropriateness if they are to avoid sanction and

ridicule. All these processes may be undertaken without the help of the beauty professional, or with the help of professionals of another kind (e.g hairdressers, beauticians, clothing shop assistants). However, in all of these spheres the woman is constantly negotiating her own relationship to femininity in relation to both inner (self-view and worldview, or the habitus) and outer (position) influences. This does not necessarily require a conscious decision-making process but may simply be seen as the ongoing negotiation between knowledge, skill, and performance, all of which can operate at either a conscious or automatic level (Black 2004:75).

This knowledge of what constitutes an appropriate style and aesthetic as it relates to other social locations is learned through the life course: such “cultural narratives of age and expectation” (Gullette 2015:22) not only help people learn what appropriate style and expression is, but also the appropriate reaction to any violation of said ‘cultural narrative.’ Thus, these cultural narratives create and reinforce “informal rules” about old age that are widely policed: “while there is nothing inherently wrong with older age groups dressing in clothes or adopting punk hairstyles associated with younger groups, the old person may well experience sanction for doing so. Indeed, the Irish sometimes chastise old people as ‘mutton dressed as lambs!’” (Calasanti and Slevin 2001:15).

This appropriate style has historically featured common themes for women entering old age: “more covered up clothing, with longer lengths and higher necks; less showy, fashionable or overtly sexy styles; and darker, lower toned colours” (Twigg 2015:150-151). Such strategies all serve to hide markers of an ageing body

in recognition of women's departure from "the youthful ideal that is valorized and celebrated in surrounding visual culture" (151). Twigg's (2015) argues that her previous (2013) research provides evidence that little has changed in how women respond to oppressive social pressures to adjust their style to reflect their advancing age. Sandberg (2015) discusses the "discursive shift" from which the cultural trope of the "sexy senior" emerged, providing "discourses about sexy seniors are not necessarily liberating for all older adults" (223) as it only creates a new cultural narrative and subsequent pressure about how to age successfully.

In spite of "new" discourses that may be taken as liberating older adults to celebrate their age (Twigg 2015), the message remains that women must engage in beauty work to mediate and conceal the effects of ageing. Hurd Clarke (2011) illustrates this in her summary of critiques aimed at the popular Dove Campaign for Real Beauty. Scholars "contend the campaign is ultimately about the marketing of beauty products, including those that adhere to anti-aging discourses despite their 'Pro-Age' product line name, and is thereby underscored by the message that even 'real women' must ultimately engage in beauty work and discipline their bodies with a variety of cosmetics and lotions in order to be feminine and socially valued" (105).

Calasanti (2015) argues that, rather than challenging it, successful ageing rhetoric compliments ageism and othering. "In this sense, ageism was not challenged so much as displaced, redefined, and perhaps intensified. Instead of accruing to chronological age, ageist exclusion is based on proximity to the successful ageing paradigm" (7). Thus, as Gilleard and Higgs (2015) posit that

measures of age have moved from chronology to the stage of “consumption and lifestyle, technologies of the self and the life politics of identity” (34), so ageism too has transformed to keep up with evolving discourses.

Thus, women know that they should simultaneously stave off looking old at all costs *and* that they should also embrace an appearance that appropriately reflects their age and the loss of status that comes along with it. As such, maintaining a feminine appearance gradually becomes less about beauty, though still rooted in youthful and feminine beauty ideals, and more about appropriate attractiveness: “women’s understanding of beauty is driven by an awareness of social location and cultural distinctions” (Gimlin 2002:48).

### **Women’s Hair and Performance of Culture and Age**

It is apparent, then, that negotiating and maintaining an appropriate attractiveness is a key component of aging for women. The struggle for women is not just to maintain their youth, but also to maintain their youthful femininity (Calasanti and Slevin 2001:64). A widely used device to help accomplish this performance of both age and gender is the manipulation and presentation of one’s hair, as it is both easily changed and relatively inexpensive to maintain (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko 2010:1025). Early marketing efforts by Clairol in the 1960s saw success and a huge increase in older women dying their hair. These ads coupled gray hair with loss of femininity, indicating that women had to ‘wash away the gray’ if they wanted romantic attention from their husbands (Weitz 2004:192). While both women and men dye their hair, men do so at a much lower rate, and frequently with motivations attached to a unique age performance rooted in heterosexual masculinity (Hearn and Wray 2015).

The manipulation and expression of women's hair changes meaning with age; young women may experiment with hair to communicate a variety of views, while as we age controlling one's hair becomes a means to "confront an appearance that is changing against our will and threatening our identity in the process" (Weitz 2004:200). Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2010), found that as women age, hair care becomes more and more central to both gender performance and living with and challenging age-based discrimination. Through their interviews with older women about their perceptions of white, gray, and dyed hair, Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko found both that women ascribed standards to what types of white or gray hair could be considered beautiful (and what other physical features must be present to compliment that hair), and were more likely to find someone else's white or gray hair more attractive than their own hair (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko 2010).

Thus, aging women are susceptible not only to self-policing (self-deprecating remarks or behaviors in reference to their own hair), but also to societal policing (age-based remarks or behaviors in reference to others assigning value to younger hair) of their hair-based age expression. Even *how* women elect to control their hair becomes subject to intercession. For example, Ward and Holland (2011) described hair stylists as "arbiters of women's hair. Aging women were pressured into certain styles that were specific for old women" (Ward and Holland 2011:302). Not only do hair stylists influence how older women negotiate appropriate aesthetics in terms of hairstyles (in terms of length, color, and so on), but women are often conscious of and contribute their own understanding of an age performance that is consistent with their class and other social locations. Like Gimlin, Ward and Holland (2011) recognize the role of the hair stylists in creating an age

appropriate performance in a way that “... reveal[s] that image dilemmas for older people are often negotiated under conditions of limited agency or choice. More than any other part of our appearance, hairstyles are frequently co-produced and as such can be a locus for conflicting notions of acceptability and appropriateness related to later life” (302-303). Gimlin’s (2002) interviews of hair salon clients and stylists illustrate this point: “Hair, for Pamela’s clients, is part of gender enactment; knowing the appropriate way to wear one’s hair at a given point in one’s life suggests gender enactment limited by the requirements of aging femininity” (37).

What people do with their bodies, including their hair, has significance in all stages of life. It is a primary medium for communicating a host of information to the world around us; we can express our age, gender, and other statuses just by how we shape and color what grows out of our scalps (Weitz 2004:xiii). While fitting in becomes a significant motivation for dying or styling one’s hair a certain way, as Weitz (2004) discusses in terms of cultural and racial locations, manipulating one’s style can also be used to rebel against mainstream culture and to signify membership in particular groups or subcultures.

For example, some people use hairstyle and color show alignment and membership with punk, goth, and various other subcultures. In Weitz’s (2004) analysis of women using hair as a rejection of mainstream culture, however, she emphasizes that it was not to reject femininity; a woman could be styling her hair in unique ways in order to “look sexy and feminine *because* she looked different” (85).

A privileged status, however, is often requisite for pulling off a style based in this difference, as it is still based in hegemonic beauty ideals. This is particularly in terms of

age: western beauty standards are rooted in appearing “young, thin, toned, healthy, White, suntanned body flawless and wrinkle-free skin, perfectly coiffed hair, little or no body hair, artfully applied makeup and the latest fashionable trappings” (Hurd Clark 2011:1). Again, women must have the knowledge and skill to maintain an adherence to appropriate appearances in terms of femininity (Black 2004), even if they bend the rules by adding an “edgy” cherry red haircut and black clothing (Weitz 2004). As such, a style based difference is still subject to sanctions based in appropriate performances of gender and age.

### **#grannyhair as a Style of Difference**

This style of difference might be seen in the recent trend of the #grannyhair trend on instagram (a label images usually associated with young women posting pictures of their hair dyed white, gray, and silver). Following Weitz’s logic of hair manipulation as a means to reject mainstream culture, the appearance of this style in the world of high fashion and among celebrities to highlight their ‘edgy’ look (Slate.com) has inspired thousands of women to show off white, gray, and silver styles.

Hair, generally and historically speaking, is a “social symbol that allows people to associate themselves with others along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and age” (Barber 2008:457). Hairstyles, as symbols, can also hold different meanings in different cultural scripts: “Blonde hair on a woman, for instance, carries a vast and complex range of associations, some of them contradictory, and some stronger than others; as we have seen they appear to be somewhat different for a man...Thus, the same hair may mean different ‘things’” (Synnott 1987:407). As hairstyles are deeply rooted in culture values and practices,

they can change meaning over time in response to various social forces (Mageo 1996).

One way that symbols change meaning is through the appropriation or commodification of a symbol by another group (Rogers 2006). Once that symbol gains meaning within a group or culture, it can then be used by individuals to communicate various things within the context of that group or culture. “Symbols begin psychogenetically; they are assimilated by the group for communicative purposes. Cultural symbols may then be used to express private complexes or personal resistance to social morality...hair, as a symbol, is part of a social communications about gender roles and moral rules...” (Mageo 1996:159).

Ziff and Rao (1997) discuss the transmission of cultural objects as multidirectional, heavily based on the dynamics of power relationships. As such, a dominant group may appropriate and ascribe new meaning onto a cultural object or symbol, at which point “cultural minorities often are encouraged, if not obliged, to adapt or assimilate the cultural forms and practices of the dominant group” (7). If we apply this to #grannyhair, we might see that younger groups appropriate gray and white hair, ascribe a new meaning onto it, labeling it trendy, edgy, or sexy. Which then encourages, if not obliges, older people to adapt and operate within this new meaning. According to Rogers (2006), this kind of commodification “both enhances the illusion of the commodity’s ‘intrinsic (fetishized) value and serves to mystify the social relations involved in its production and consumption” (488). As such, we see conflicting views around what #grannyhair means for the social relations between young and old women embracing gray and white hair.

There are various positions surrounding what this style might mean for older adults with natural gray and white hair, and ageism more broadly. Based on social media response, many celebrate the trend as allowing people of all ages to “embrace” their gray hair (huffingtonpost.com), while some question whether the “feel good factor” has anything to do with changing social constructs of age and gender or if it just a “quirky fashion fad” (dailymail.co.uk). Still along the same lines, others still refute outright that the idea of the trend changing perceptions of aging bodies, saying those dying their hair gray are “going for edgy, not old” and that the style offers “all of the color, none of the judgments” (mic.com) of old age. In this logic, young women may take on gray and white hair to achieve an “edgy” but still feminine look, but are not labeled as acting inappropriate in their performance of gender and age. At the same time, older women with gray and white hair, as discussed above, face pressures to adopt styles that are recognized as appropriate for old women, as they are still in comparison to young women. Because of this, old women embracing their gray may not be celebrated for sporting a “different” or feminine style (Ward and Holland 2011).

### **Social Media and Selfies**

Social media platforms have grown to prominence in recent years, and some scholars point to them as uniquely reorganized power relationships that might be reshaped (Dijck and Poell 2013). As age relations are one type of power relationship, social media may provide a space where exclusionary discourse based on age also can be profoundly reshaped. As such, an argument arises that #grannyhair may provide a locus for challenging age and gender relations.

In a general debate as to whether social media platforms do indeed have the potential to have a major impact (either positive or negative) on interpersonal relations, there are those who argue that people, in large part, do the same things and behave in the same ways as they do offline, though digital platforms may enhance both positive and negative interactions (Ferguson 2016; Lloyd 2014). Given the highly visual nature of gendered age performances and the ability to present a edited, filtered, or idealized version of ourselves on social media, the argument could be made that gendered age relations may be a set of power relations that has the unique potential to be reshaped on social media.

Beauty professionals, such as hair stylists, play an important role in how ageing women negotiate an appropriate performance of age in terms of their style (Ward and Holland 2011, Gimlin 2002). Social media sites offer an additional layer for the co-construction of age appropriate appearance. In broad terms of identity on the internet, Hine (2000) posits that the flexibility one has in creating a virtual identity not only allows for greater “identity play,” but also “[suggests] that the technologies themselves are causing a change in conceptions of identity” (Hine 2000).

Given that age performance of age is rooted in appearance (Laz 2003), that ageism results from being judged as old (Bytheway 2005), and that the visual self can be easily manipulated and presented in an ideal fashion in the virtual social world (Katz and Marshall 2003), we might ask if age performance, ageism, and age relations are altered as social media use expands and older populations increasingly participate in them.

Social media profiles, as argued by Davis and Jurgenson (2014), are created as a negotiation of identity not only by users adding content to their profiles, but also by other

users contributing content or offering validation (or not) to the user generated content. This validation, accomplished through tagging, liking, and sharing content, offers an important indicator of how successfully users negotiate their online identity: “social media audiences give greater credence to other-generated content, than self generated content” (Davis and Jurgenson 2014:479). Additionally, Tanner, Maher, and Fraser (2013) argue that the presentation of the digital self is necessarily dependent upon the response of the users’ social network:

In our view, while these networking platforms do allow for new articulations of the self, these self-productions cannot be explained as inward-looking, self-admiring narcissism. Social networking platforms are intrinsically relational and interactive, and the selves produced through them reflect this. ... Creating an appealing, legitimate self, whether corporeally or digitally, is both individual and social, both self referential and tied to the other. Social networking sites and the digital selves produced through them require simultaneous attention to the self and to the anticipated audience (153).

Thus, with the possibility for presenting a carefully created and perfected online identity (Katz and Marshall 2003), the ability that other social media users have to reframe or invalidate that identity has the possibility to reshape the power relations that impact age and gender relations in in both positive and negative ways.

Data show that the vast majority of American adults (71%) use some sort of social networking site as of 2014 (Social Media Update 2014). Given this widespread social media engagement, scholars have begun to explore its impact on bodies in terms of expression and satisfaction. Research finds patterns of positive experiences using social

media as a medium for users to develop “...ways of knowing, understanding and experiencing their bodies” (Tiidenberg and Cruz 2015:94). One study delved into analyses of “Selfie” posting on various platforms and has found, for instance, that Selfies correlated with levels of body image satisfaction (Ridgway and Clayton 2016), still another study found that using such sites can dispose users to experience depressive symptoms as a result of negative social comparison (Lup, Trub, and Rosenthal 2015). Such research suggests examining links between social media posts, particularly selfies and similar photos that express gender and age, may potentially illuminate possible challenges to such power relations.

Many scholars advocate for a broader understanding of possible adverse effects on older Internet users (Leist 2013), especially as older people are using online social networks at a growing rate (Social Media Update 2014). As older users become more common in online social networks, the phenomena that are so influential for younger users may pose similar problems to older users too, including instances of cyberbullying and perceptions that other users are happier and better off than oneself (Leist 2013:383). As we saw in the study on ageism by Ward and Holland, hairstyles can be a “locus for conflicting notions of acceptability and appropriateness” (2011:302-303). In terms of age performance, Mellor, Firth, and Moore (2008) found contradictory results between quantitative and qualitative measures concerning whether the introducing elders found the internet to be a positive experience: “The findings...present something of a conundrum, with the questionnaire data indicating a somewhat negative impact, while the interview data indicates a largely positive impact” (39). Given these contradictory results, social media may provide a space where, rather than overt exclusionary behaviors, more

subtle discrimination may have a more significant presence. This suggests that the second level of ageist discrimination, based in how online social network users construct age appropriate performance, may persevere in the online world.

## The Present Study

Research finds that behaviors and presentations of old age are policed by social standards of age appropriate appearance, though this may occur differently for younger women adopting age inappropriate styles. As well, gendered discrimination and marginalization are largely rooted in the centrality of attractiveness for women (Laz 2003, Ward and Holland 2011, Clark and Griffin 2008). As such, the presentation of an older woman's hair is central to her expression of age, which can be judged as appropriate (as in "acting her age") or inappropriate (as in "she's trying too hard" and "she's not fooling anyone"). The dilemma then, emerges when older women must stave off looking old at all costs, while simultaneously presenting an age appropriate style (Ward and Holland 2010). Even if a woman allows her hair to gray or turn white naturally, it is arbitrated by certain standards of beauty, with uniformed white as superior to a naturally uneven graying head of hair: "...the possession of white hair may offer women one means of being considered more attractive than their gray counterparts, even as it reduces their access to the rights and privileges afforded younger-looking individuals" (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko 2010:1024). Younger looking women that adopt these same hair colors, however, may not be required to relinquish their rights and privileges of youth, as their femininity remains intact. Weitz (2004) illustrates this in discussing young women rejecting mainstream culture through style without rejecting femininity in her interview with Celia about her experience with punk and goth hair and dress: "Throughout these changes, however, Celia's goal was to reject mainstream culture, not to reject femininity. To Celia and her new friends, both male and female, she looked sexy ad feminine *because* she looked different" (85). As such, participating in the

#grannyhair trend may not challenge gendered ageism, while simultaneously obligating old women to “adapt or assimilate” adhere to new (and enforcing old) cultural standards of beauty work set by the dominant group (Ziff and Rao 1997).

This study will analyze the recent fashion of young women dyeing their hair white and gray as part of the #grannyhair trend and determine how this trend contributes to or challenges the systematic devaluation of attributes of aged bodies. As the #grannyhair trend takes a marker of old age (white and gray hair) and reframes it in the context of being stylish and beautiful, it may also influence or challenge how we view or define age- and gender-appropriate appearances and performances. Thus, this research is important because it can show processes by which age and gender relations evolve and operate.

While this study focuses only on women, this study will be a gendered analysis based on previous literature that establishes different experiences of aging and thus maintain their bodies and appearances differently. And indeed, posts from very few men were found in this study, making clear that this is predominantly a woman’s trend. While this study does not compare the experiences of aging men and women in terms of the #grannyhair trend, it does still engage with a gendered experience of aging as it pertains to women through analyzing content from both young and old women as they engage with the trend.

In this study, I ask: what does the #grannyhair trend mean for gender and age relations? Specifically, does it challenge ageism by altering age-based standards of appearance and presentation for older women? How are boundaries of age-appropriate behaviors maintained by online social network users? To answer these questions, I look

at images posted on instagram labeled with the #grannyhair designation as well as their associated comment threads. Specifically, to address my research question I ask:

- How do younger and older online users react to #grannyhair images in relation to gendered, age-appropriate appearances?
- Does gendered ageism occur overtly or through expressions of second level of ageism?
  - Do younger and older users (both posters and commenters) contribute to ageism in the same way?
- What markers of age do instagram users use to categorize users as old? Do these markers reflect gendered ageism?

In asking how online users, young and old, react to #grannyhair images in relation to gendered, age-appropriate appearances, I will be able to discuss if and how users approach the trend, both as users and commenters. This is instrumental in this study as it will show how older and younger users enter the conversation about #grannyhair and also how they talk (or don't talk) about the devaluation of aged bodies. This question will also help to discern whether or not there is a shift in gendered age relations in response to this trend. If both old and young women engage in the trend in a way that values old woman's bodies, then of course this would show a positive shift in age relations. If only old women engage in the trend in such a way, then it does not necessarily mean the same thing, as the powerful group (young women) are still devaluing old women. That is, whether or not this trend is offering a platform upon which young and old instagram users may advocate for moving towards greater valuation of old women's bodies, or whether it is indeed just a

trend that is still rooted in hegemonic beauty ideals. This question will be answered through an analysis of emergent themes in the data.

Additionally, it is important to analyze how gendered ageism occurs (either through overt or second level of ageism) as is directed at both older and younger posters, as the broader question in this study asks specifically if ageism has been challenged through this trend. As such, there would certainly be implications for intervention if ageism only manifests in certain ways for certain groups. This question will be answered by coding for both overt and second level of ageism comments on the instagram posts during the initial coding process.

Asking specifically what age markers instagram users use to categorize users as old (or not) will help to answer the broader question of how age-appropriate behaviors are regulated by instagram users. To answer this question, I will initially code for whether or not commenters focus on physical features of young and old posters serve to set aside old bodies as devalued while privileging young characteristics. Additionally, through a thematic analysis I will further explore how old bodies are being marked as old (and devalued) and how young bodies are marked as young (and valued).

Through exploring these codes, I will be able to discuss if and how this trend contributes to or challenges the systematic devaluation of attributes of aged bodies, and how or if this trend has influenced or challenged how we view or define age and gender appropriate appearances and performances. As such, I can discuss whether or not those with power (young and attractive women) are using a cultural symbol (gray and white hair) from those without power (old women) in a way that challenges power relations, or if it is merely an appropriation of style that leaves age-based power relations intact and

unchallenged. That is, I ask whether people engaging in this trend are offering any new conversations that speak to gendered age relations or if they merely focus on the fashion. Further, these factors may lead to a broader discussion of gendered age relations and ageism.

## Chapter 2: Methods

The data from this study come from instagram posts between 2015 and 2016 featuring pictures of women with white or gray (or a combination thereof) hair and labeled with the hash tag #grannyhairdontcare. The granny hair trend started and exists largely on instagram: an online social network based on sharing images and designating them with one or more hash tags to express a certain meaning, movement, or emotion. The hashtag #grannyhair or #grannyhairdontcare is a designation that is generally associated with young women dyeing their hair white, gray, or a combination of the two colors together. Although young women use this hashtag frequently, some older women use it as well. These images also allow for other users to comment on the images. The comments and images comprise the data for this project.

### Data Collection

The sampling frame for this qualitative study will come from public instagram posts that are images of women with white, gray, or some combination thereof, hair and include the #grannyhairdontcare designation. Instagram is an image-sharing based platform where images are posted directly to the site (as opposed to shared or linked from other platforms) and is the best dataset for exploring this trend. While the hash tag exists on other social media platforms as well, (like twitter and Facebook) most images are linked instagram posts. Although my intention was to use the #grannyhair tag, the posts with this designation were so prolific that it was not possible to access images earlier than the last few months of 2016. As a result, I elected to use the second most used hashtag associated with this trend, #grannyhairdontcare, in order to access images from 2015 and 2016. However, I was unable to retrieve posts any farther back, as was my original

intention in order to determine how or if the conversations around the trend changed over time, as both the instagram website and the instagram filtering program, iconosquare, were unable to retrieve so many images. A representative from iconosquare responded to my inquiry directly by saying that their algorithms weren't capable of processing so many posts. As such, I was unable to test if age relations changed over time, but instead I discuss my results in how they agree or disagree from the literature.

In order to collect instagram posts for a qualitative content analysis I began by searching the #grannyhairdontcare designation, and compiled a collection of images that meet the scope conditions. Searching this hashtag on the instagram website brings up all publicly posted images that the user has labeled with this designation (see figure 1). To be used in this study, the images had to show significant portions of the face of the poster, they must be in English, and the person in the image must have some hair that is white, gray, or a combination thereof. The images must have at least 3 comment associated with them.

These data were filtered using an application (iconosquare.com) designed to sort instagram posts by date, number of comments, and language (although, because the hashtag, #grannyhairdontcare is English, many posts had to be excluded as the comments were still in other languages). Once the filters were applied, the data were directly collected from the instagram website (instagram.com). I took a sample of these images so that the study will include systematic random sample 100 images from each year in order to compare over time. In 2015, I selected every sixth usable post (excluding posts that did not meet the sampling criteria – usually this was due to comments being in a foreign language). In 2016, I selected every eighth usable post, following the same criteria. Once

the original sample was collected, I also selectively sampled additional posts due to an underrepresentation of old women posts meeting the sampling criteria (this was unexpected, as many of posts of old women were in languages other than English). The total sample size was 209.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Coding**

The text included in the original post was analyzed with the comments responding to the image. The data were interpreted systematically using a codebook to segment content into categories that address the research questions (Schreier 2014). The codebook was developed through a trial coding with a two other coders to establish inter-rater reliability (Barbour 2014). We coded a sample of the data multiple times, adjusting descriptions of codes through discussion after each coding round. Inter-coder reliability was established on the third round of coding ( $\alpha=0.87$ ). Inter-coder reliability was calculated using a reliability calculator (Freelon 2010).

While the categorized segments were analyzed in crosstab analysis., I also conducted a thematic analysis through an iterative process to further explore emergent themes (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). The qualitative data were managed and analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

These methods are appropriate for this project in that using initial codes informed by previous research offers answers to the yes or no questions posed in this study. That is, by running crosstabs by age group, I can easily determine whether or not there a significant difference in the kinds of ageist comments young and old posters receive and post, or whether instagram users note other markers of age outside of gray or white hair.

Adding a thematic analysis as well offers answers to the “how” questions posed in this study. For example, how do old and young posters talk about gray and white hair in the context of this trend, and how do others react to these comments? How are boundaries of age-appropriate behaviors maintained by these users? I answer these questions through analyzing the initial codes, exploring each code in response to each research question, and revisiting relevant posts to develop those themes around a common thread.

In looking at the images, I approached the data looking for general codes in the images themselves of uniformed hair color, and highly styled appearance and adherence to western standards of feminine beauty. As well, I coded for apparent age of the poster. All images were assigned a code of either appearing young (no appearance of wrinkles, loss of skin tone in the face, or other markers of age), middle-aged (subject has subtle wrinkles or creases in the skin but not extremely defined wrinkles or loss of skin tone), or old (presence of obvious wrinkles and other markers of age, such as sagging skin or age spots). This coding combined with the comment coding helped to develop ideas and themes during the qualitative analysis that allowed for exploration of how comments based in age, gender, both types of ageism, and so on varied by apparent age-group.

I also examined the comments responding to each image, looking for comments based in gender and age, as well as whether they are instances of overt or second level expression of ageism and boundary maintenance around age appropriate appearance and behavior. I investigated the nature of the comments for codes of second level compliments and joking, and subtle confirmation of boundaries around what constitutes age appropriate appearance and behavior. During the initial coding process, I also added codes to label positive and negative responses to the trend specifically, comments that

note whether the subject can “pull off” the look, as well as comments that were direct responses to the trend itself that were negative or positive.

### **Analysis**

First, to address the question of how online users react to #grannyhairdontcare images in relation to gendered, age-appropriate behaviors in terms of appearance, I looked at whether women posting images of themselves using the #grannyhairdontcare designation elicit comments evaluating their femininity and/or age-appropriate behavior or if they receive comments that communicated valuation of their style and age. This was done coding for comments made based in gender, age, and gendered age appropriate performance. I expected the data to show that young posters will be most likely to receive comments in reference to their physical attractiveness as a gendered performance, and that older posters will receive comments that are both gendered and aged. This would show that Instagram users react to young women’s age performance as gendered, whereas they react to older posters’ performance as both gendered and aged. While both young and old women have age, it means different things to each. As the privileged group, young women’s age is unmarked, unless they clearly deviate. Thus point in the case of granny hair, young women are likely only to receive comments about age emphasize that they are not old. As such, I would conclude that users are participating in this granny hair conversation in a way that affirms it as a trend, not a movement towards greater valuation of old women’s bodies.

Second, to address the question of how (or if) gendered ageism occurs overtly or through expressions of second level discrimination, I coded comments for the presence of overt ageism and second level ageism. As users posting on images do not have an

apparent age, to explore whether or not younger and older users contribute to ageism in the same way, I coded comments that reference the posters own age as either young or old. I did not expect every image to have comments that reflect one or both types of ageism, but of those that did, I expected to find more comments that reflect the second level ageism through compliments and encouragement that are rooted in an implicit view of old age as negative. For example, young women might frame their granny hair by describing themselves as “hot grannies,” thereby giving their gray hairstyle value, but only so long as they are clearly still young and sexy. As such, users could ascribe value to gray hair while simultaneously distancing gray hair from old age, thereby reinforcing old bodies as a negative. Overt ageism I expected to find more in the case of posts of young women. An example of this might be young women offering jokes about cognitive or physical decline associated with old age, emphasizing that clearly they are not old, because old age means hearing loss, decreased mobility, forgetfulness, and so on. For both overt and second level ageism, I expected there to be a close relationship with the third research question of how Instagram users categorize people as young or old, as discussed below.

Third, to answer what markers of age Instagram users use to categorize users as old and if they provide a basis for gendered ageism, I coded comments that reference other physical features in the image as valuing features associated with youth (such as a sexually desirable body) and/or devaluing features associated with old age (such as wrinkles or physical/cognitive impairments associated with old age). I expected for younger posters to receive comments on their body, face, and other features that are clearly not marked as old, but rather as rooted in youthful beauty standards and sexuality.

That is, engaging in the granny hair trend may offer an elevation in status for old women, shown by comments on old women's posts that note that the style is an improvement on their natural gray hair or 'old lady haircut,' labeling them instead as a 'silver fox'—a term, "fox," which generally refers to (youthful) attractiveness. Meanwhile, young posters may receive comments that more explicitly distance them from old age, noting that they are 'young and beautiful enough' to make the hair look good, or that they 'better hope they look that good' when they actually do enter old age. Here, the overarching theme is an emphasis on their young and attractive features – there is no question that they are making the style desirable, not the other way around.

To situate this coding in the context of actual images, Consider figure 2, a post featuring a young adult woman. This image is consistent with the theme of uniformed hair color, as the hair is consistently colored, as shown from multiple angles. The appearance is stylized, with the subject wearing dramatic makeup, and the hair styled into waves, curls, and a ponytail in the different perspectives. The woman also portrays standards of western feminine beauty: she is young, thin, tan, her lips are full and emphasized, and her cheekbones are well defined (Hurd Clarke 2011, Bordo 1993, Bartky 1998). As such, if the majority of #grannyhair images are situated within a framework of homogenized western beauty ideals (as was expected), then the standard is set for what counts as a deviant and what can (or should) be policed in an image (Bordo 1993). This image would be coded as having comments that are both gendered and aged, the presence of second level ageism, but would not be coded as having commenters referencing their own age other markers of old age. The second level ageism in this image comes from the comment "Nah!!! Too witchy looking. You need a personal stylist

for it to look like this everyday!” The second level of ageism occurs when we ascribe value to being old so long as it mimics being young; in this comment, we see that the poster is discouraged from dying their hair gray because it would take a lot of work to avoid looking old in a bad way – witchy. The implication here is that looking ‘old’ is ok, so long as you don’t look old in a bad way—that is, actually old. This image would also be coded as having a highly stylized appearance, western beauty ideal, and yielding to comments sanctioning a gendered and aged performance.

Examples of expressions of the second level of ageism are apparent in figures 2 and 3. In figure 2, we see evidence of age-based discrimination, with users expressing disapproval of this style as it may make the poster appear “witchy” without a personal stylist to perfect the look on a daily basis. By contrast, overt ageism appears in figure 5, a post of a young woman with gray and silver hair that receives the comment “Why do you want to look older!!! I just don’t get it?” This comment, rather than implying that looking old is bad if you can’t also look young and attractive, directly associates looking old as a bad thing. For the question of boundary maintenance around age appropriate appearance and behavior, consider figure 3. In figure 3, we see what would be coded as a senior woman with white and gray hair. In the comments, we see a user emphasizing that the subject’s hair isn’t gray, but rather “beautiful strips of silver” in the context of a complement. This falls under both the codes of second level ageist compliments as well as appropriate appearance and behavior. It is the second level of ageism in that the comment reinforces the notion that gray or white hair is attractive, but only within a conditional context: with strips of silver, it doesn’t really look old.

### Chapter 3: Results

Results from this study were mostly consistent with the expectations formed from previous research. In terms of the first question, How do online users react to #grannyhair images in relation to gendered, age-appropriate appearances, I expected to find that young posters would be more likely to receive comments in reference to their physical attractiveness as a gendered performance, and that older posters would receive comments based in both age and gender appropriate performances.

*How do online users react to #grannyhair images in relation to gendered, age-appropriate appearances?*

As seen in Table 1, below, a crosstab analysis revealed no significant differences in gendered comments by age group, but revealed significant differences ( $p=0.000$ ) in age comments. Less than 15 percent (13%) percent of young posters, almost half (47%) of middle-age posters, and nearly two-thirds (64%) of old posters received age comments. Nearly half (47%) of all posts received comments focused on gendered aesthetics,

**Table 1.**

Age Group	Age Comments		Total
	No	Yes	
Young	160 87.43%	23 12.57%	183 100%
Middle-Age	8 53.33%	7 46.67%	15 100%
Old	4 36.36%	7 63.64%	11 100%
Total	172 82.30%	37 17.70%	209 100%
<b>Pearson chi2(2) = 27.8784</b>			<b>p=0.000</b>

and there was no significant difference across age groups. That is, all women were likely to received accolades for performing a gender-appropriate appearance, specifically, comments that focus on the subject’s feminine beauty or sexiness. From this, the theme of “pulling it off” emerged in the thematic analysis. In terms of being able to “pull off” the look, and as shown in Table 2, I found that regardless of styling, it is the women with physical features that align with western beauty standards that receive praise for making the style beautiful or sexy, regardless of styling or make-up. In fact, those without styled hair or appearance more frequently received affirmation that they could pull off the look, indicating that granny hair is not a look that one can aspire to do well without the requisite phenotype. These results were significant, with posters displaying highly-styled appearances ( $p=0.012$ ) and highly-styled hair ( $p=0.020$ ) being less likely to receive comments that they could “pull it off.”

**Table 2.**

Pulling it Off	Styled Appearance		Total
	No	Yes	
Yes	15 57.69%	11 42.31%	26 100%
No	59 32.42%	123 67.58%	182 100%
Total	74 82.30%	134 17.70%	209 100%
<b>Pearson chi2(2) = 6.3408</b>			$p=0.012$

**Table 3.**

Pulling it Off	Styled Hair		Total
	No	Yes	
Yes	14 53.85%	12 46.15%	26 100%
No	56 30.77%	126 69.23%	182 100%
Total	70	138	209

	33.65%	66.35%	100%
<b>Pearson chi2(2) = 5.4261</b>	<b>p=0.020</b>		

Older posters received more comments based on age performance than young posters, as shown in Table 1, above. So, while older posters still face social pressures to engage in appropriate gender and age performances, younger women only receive gender-based accountability. This indicates that while the trend may be about maintaining an age-appropriate performance for older posters, appearing old is not really a factor for how younger posters are perceived. Even though young posters often framed their #grannyhair posts by allusion to age, they did so with reference to explicit sexualized femininity, with phrases like “hot grandma”, #geriatricsneverlookedsogood, and “GILF” proliferating throughout the posts. So while younger posters did receive some comments based on age, it was frequently the posters themselves that made age based comments in a way that made a clear distinction between their engagement with granny hair and old age.

One common response from old women to their commenters was the idea that they were “giving in” to their gray hair, or “letting go,” even going so far as to call dying their graying hair as “oppressive.” This sort of combative dialogue echoes previous research on ageing women dying their hair, such as Weitz’s (2004) discussion of using hair dye to “confront an appearance that is changing against our will and threatening our identity in the process” (200). In both the case of these posters and in Weitz’s discussion, letting go or giving in to grey hair does not necessarily challenge the fact that, for old women, gray hair is still a marker of age and that beauty work must be performed to manage it in order to adhere to the standards set by the privileged group.

For some older women using the hashtag, even with a general sentiment of “granny hair don’t care,” there was still an emphasis on deliberate silver hair – indicating that they do, in fact, care:

**Poster 2015.103:** Sat with toner on for ages [because I] was wanting it to look silver, I’m going grey anyway so as well to embrace the grey.”

**Commenter:** Shut up it was an accident :))))

**Poster 2015.103:** It wasn’t an accident! I deliberately done it (sic) so it would end up silver!

In this case, the poster’s statement poses some contradictions that perhaps indicate the difficulties involved in older women allowing their hair to become grey. On the one hand, she is talking about “embracing” the gray, but on the other, she also makes clear that she is managing *how* her hair grays (by dyeing it silver). As such, even embracing gray hair must be mediated by beauty work in order to conform to standards of style led by the dominant (young) group. So, while this poster may be embracing gray hair, she is not giving up the fight of maintaining a valued feminine aesthetic to combat her aging appearance.

The following post is quite similar. The poster comments that she needs to go get her “grey hair sorted,” and is then encouraged to “embrace” the gray by a commenter. The poster notes that she has not “given up” yet, as she has already made an appointment to dye her gray hairs coming in, indicating that she is not “giving up” on managing her gray hair. As such, she is unwilling to give up battling to maintain a young feminine aesthetic and the status that goes along with it:

**Poster 2015.102:** Gotta go get grey hair sorted #grannyhairdontcare!

**Commenter:** You look lovely! Embrace it Nanny (poster's name)!

**Poster 2015.102:** Thanks...but I have made appointment...I'm not giving up yet!

However, two women in the sample stood out, and documented their journey of allowing their natural grey to grow in, abandoning the uniform color and truly embracing their natural hair. But even through this deliberate abandonment of the standardized look, second level ageist rhetoric emerged, particularly when considering the use of simultaneously used hashtags such as #goinggreygracefully and #selflove from these two posts by the same instagram user.

**Poster 2016:101:** Today is exactly #14weeks since I last dyed my hair. It probably looks like a hot mess to other people but I feel SO GOOD about it and about my decision to stop fighting the grey. It might sound ridiculous but I didn't realize how oppressive it was to try and keep on top of covering my grey hair. I wish I had done this sooner! #grayhair #greghairdontcare #grayhairdontcare #greyarmy #silversister #silversisters #grannyhair #grannyhairdontcare #gogrey #greytransition #ditchthedye #naturalisbeautiful #grombre #gogrombre #silverfox #silvervixen #goinggreygracefully #selflove

**Poster 2016:102:** Haven't posted my #greghair progress in awhile so here's a #latergram from Friday when it was 21 weeks and 1 day (who's counting?!) since I last dyed my hair. Some days I feel like my hair looks awful but this day wasn't one of them. I don't for a minute regret my decision to stop fighting a losing battle #grayhair #greghairdontcare #grayhairdontcare #greyarmy #silversister #silversisters #grannyhair

#grannyhairdontcare #gogrey #greytransition #ditchthedye  
 #naturalisbeautiful #grombre #gogrombre #silverfox #silvervixen  
 #goinggreygracefully #selflove

Another poster described abandoning hair dye as liberating:

**Poster 2016.105:** Just got my haircut really short because I decided not to dye my hair anymore and be and feel free

**Commenter:** Wow. Gorgeous! I also decided to stop with the color and go natural 8 months ago. Liberating.

*Does gendered ageism occur overtly or through expressions of a second level of ageism discrimination? Do younger and older users (both posters and commenters) contribute to ageism in the same way?*

In addressing the question of how (or if) gendered ageism occurred overtly or through expressions of the second level of discrimination, I found results consistent with the expectation of finding more instances of second level ageism than overt ageism, but only just barely. In fact, of the total 209 posts, only 12 (5.74%) received second level ageist comments, and only 10 (4.78%) received overtly ageist comments. However, for both types of ageism, I found significant differences ( $p=0.000$ ) by age group, with higher percentages of second level and overtly ageist comments made on older women's posts. First, in terms of the second level of ageism, I found that 2.73% of young posters, 20.00% of middle-age posters, and 33.33% of old posters received ageist comments. Second, in terms of overt ageism, I found that 3.28% of young posters, 13.33% of middle-age posters, and 20.00% of old posters received such comments.

**Table 4.**

	2 <sup>nd</sup> Level of Ageism	
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Age Group	No	Yes	Total
Young	178 97.27%	5 2.73%	183 100%
Middle-Age	12 80.00%	3 20.00%	15 100%
Old	7 63.64%	4 36.26%	11 100%
Total	197 94.26%	12 5.74%	209 100%
<b>Pearson chi2(2) = 27.7563</b>			P=0.000

**Table 5.**

Age Group	Overt Ageism		Total
	No	Yes	
Young	177 96.72%	6 3.28%	183 100%
Middle-Age	13 86.67%	2 13.33%	15 100%
Old	9 81.82%	2 18.18%	11 100%
Total	199 95.22%	10 4.78%	209 100%
<b>Pearson chi2(2) = 7.6509</b>			p=0.022

In support of these findings, the theme “Framing Old Age” emerged during the qualitative analysis. Of the ageist comments, older women often emphasized the subject’s youth in contrast to their own, saying such things that convey the sentiment, “I just don’t know why you would want to look older than you are.” By contrast, younger posters were likely to make jokes about young women soon requiring a walker or a rocking chair.

In the both cases, the chances of receiving ageist comments saw a statistically significant increase for middle-aged and old posters, as shown in tables 4 and 5 (above). Additionally, thematic analysis showed that the way young and old posters engage in ageism was markedly different. First, older posters tend to inquire as to why anyone

would want to make themselves look older when they strive so hard to put off being read as old, discussing the appearance of old age a negative. For example, in this exchange on a post of a young woman's selfie with gray and silver hair braided into an up do, the poster notes that old women often protest her decision to engage in the trend:

**Commenter:** Why do you want to look older!!! I just don't get it?

**Poster 2015.26:** Hahaha I swear old ladies are the only ones that don't like my hair [because] everyone else is obsessed [so] it's annoying!

Another example shows an older woman, again commenting on a young woman's post, emphasizing the effort that those with gray hair put in to hide it: "Looks great. Still don't know why gray before your time. We who have it are trying to cover it. Always something." Additionally, some comments indicate an awareness of the youthful appearance necessary to pull off the look: "I want granny hair, but it would probably make me look like a granny at my age." The implication here of course is that the goal most certainly is not to look old, and that if one looks old with gray hair it is negative.

By comparison, younger users engaged in ageism through joking, often using negative stereotypes to point out the fact that they are not, in fact, old. In the following exchange on a post of a young woman with long dark gray hair, the interaction pokes fun about playing bingo and hearing loss. Clearly, this style of difference is still reliant upon adherence to hegemonic beauty ideals, and it is made clear by young posters that they are still very much invested in their youthful aesthetic through denigrating ageist stereotypes.

**Poster 2016.11:** I'm just trying to play bingo and have a good time.

#grannyhairdontcare.

**Commenter:** B4

**Poster 2016.11:** @commenter what sweet potater I can't hear you

**Commenter:** B4! I know your (sic) old, but just how old are ya?

Other comments, all on posts of young to middle age women, include allusions to other markers of age, such as needing a “cane and pack of antacids,” “ok ‘mom’ don’t forget your walker” or that posters can “rock it till you’re in a rocker.” Younger posters also often received comments that their accomplishment of the style indicates that they will still be “hot” when they age. These comments, such as “Well I hope you still look like that as a Grannie!” and “At least he knows I’ll be a #hot #grandma when the time comes!” Such dialogue, combined with the old women’s comments who were concerned with looking old, indicates that both young and old women recognize and react to status loss and negativity – but young women simultaneously distance themselves from old age while arguing they will still maintain their hotness and status into old age. While there were instances of middle-age women engaging in this sort of distancing from old age, there were no instances of these comments on posts of old women. As such, both age groups contributed to ageist beliefs, albeit in different ways. Both groups clearly associate looking old as a negative. To old women, there was surprise that anyone would want to voluntarily adopt a marker of old age like gray hair, as they experience a loss of status along with markers of old age. Young women, however, flaunt the absence of other markers of old age, emphasizing their attractiveness, sexuality, and youth. In doing so, they maintain a distance from old age, and therefore still devalue old bodies.

*What markers of age do instagram users use to categorize users as old? Do these markers provide a basis for gendered ageism?*

Very few (n=5) posts received comments pointing to markers of age aside from gray or white hair. This indicates that how posters talk about doing age (as discussed with

the Framing Old Age theme) is as important as physical markers of age. However, there were significant differences ( $p=0.015$ ) between comments referencing other markers of old age by age group. Interestingly, old posters did not receive any comments pointing out other markers of old age on their posts. Just under 15 percent (13%) percent of middle-age posters received comments that referenced other markers of old age, as did about one and a half percent (1.64%) of young posters.

**Table 6.**

Age Group	Other Markers of Old Age		Total
	No	Yes	
Young	180 98.36%	3 1.64%	183 100%
Middle-Age	13 86.67%	2 13.33%	15 100%
Old	11 100.00%	0 0.00%	11 100%
Total	204 97.61%	5 2.39%	209 100%
<b>Pearson chi2(2) = 8.4034</b>			<b>p=0.015</b>

Aside from commenters explicitly pointing to markers of age aside from gray and white hair, some posters and commenters did frame old women in specifically aged ways that did not occur for young posters. For example, posts of old women were often posted by granddaughters or hair stylists and often accompanied with second level ageist comments. Thus, old women are not only being framed by this people engaging in this trend, which was instigated and controlled by the dominant youth culture, but also they are literally being spoken for and inserted into it with no subjectivity.

As well, there were multiple occurrences of hair stylists posting images of their older clients, framing them as stylish, modern, and graceful agers through second level ageist discourse. Again emphasizing deliberate silver tones, stylists posted captions like

“Just because you’re not silver yet, doesn’t mean you can’t be! This sassy one wanted a big change today! Bye bye brassy color, hello silver fox!...Told her she can be modern & didn’t need an ‘old lady cut!” and “I really enjoyed this transformation on one of my super sweet client/friends...We had discussed eventually going all natural and we finally just went for it!” I would note, however, that the end result in this case was not natural, but a highly styled gunmetal gray with silver highlights. As such, old women (even those who were posting for themselves) were framed as “good old” upon adopting the style – so long as they were performing age and gender in a “modern” way.

Of the five posts in the entire sample that had comments that pointed specifically to other markers of old age, such comments were often captions provided by the poster. As was the case in the above example of the poster proclaiming an affinity for bingo, I also found hashtags and comments from young posters themselves (rather than others commenting on their post) poking fun at the fact that, in spite of their granny hair, they had clearly not reached old age. Young women captioned their granny hair posts with phrases like “lemme get dat senior discount,” or using hashtags like #geriatricsneverlookedsogood #teamwrinklyforehead #grannylyfe #milf and #gilf. As well, some conversations joked that the posters had aged prematurely due to stress, as in this example, the conversation revolves around a young woman’s premature “midlife crisis.”

**Poster 2016.15:** My midlife crisis hit early. #grannyhairdontcare

**Commenter 1:** Who’s the old lady now?

**Commenter 2:** Oh [poster’s name]... I have heard that College life can be very stressful...

**Commenter 3:** @commenter1 respect your elders

Although not specifically centered on pointing to other aesthetic features of old age, the ways in which instagram users, both young and old, framed their discussion of the granny hairstyle does indeed provide a basis for gendered ageism. As young posters engage in joking about premature graying, the implication is that it's funny because they aren't actually old, and have not actually lost their sex appeal or youthful aesthetic (which is why "geriatrics never looked so good"), because it's being appropriated by young beautiful women, and as means something different than it does for old women (Synnott 1987). This indicates that the way we "do age" (Laz 2003) is important and much more broad than whether or not a person has gray hair or wrinkles. The way that instagram users discussed old age, as a status they have either achieved or are distancing themselves from, was not at all limited to facial features and aesthetics. That is, the way that we define "old" encompasses not only how we look, but also how we perform our age through style, behaviors, abilities, and so on.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

My study addresses questions of what the #grannyhair trend means for gender and age relations, whether it offers any challenge to ageism by altering age-based standards of appearance and presentation, and how age-appropriate behaviors are maintained in the context of this social media platform. I discuss my findings by the following three specific research questions. First, How do online users react to #grannyhair images in relation to gendered, age-appropriate appearances? Second, Does gendered ageism occur overtly or through expressions of the second level of ageist discrimination? Third, What markers of age do Instagram users use to categorize users as old?

*How do online users react to #grannyhair images in relation to gendered, age-appropriate appearances as both younger and older users participate in it?*

In addition to the patterns of ageism in the #grannyhair trend, there were also significant results in how people responded to the trend in terms of perceptions of gender and age performance. As is illustrated in the tables above, almost half (47%) of all women received comments on their gendered aesthetic, and there was no significant difference across age groups. That is, all women were likely to receive compliments for performing a gender-appropriate appearance. Consistent with Hurd Clarke's (2011) assertion that, even though old women lose status as a result of their ageing appearance, they still face pressures to "engage in beauty work and discipline their bodies...in order to be feminine and socially valued," (105) young, middle-age, and old women on Instagram were equally likely to receive comments encouraging a gendered performance. The added burden of maintaining an age-appropriate performance was apparent as well, as 46% of middle-age and 63% of old women received comments focused on their age, as compared to 24% of young posters.

As such, the style is given value and is framed by western beauty standards, aligned with young faces, consistent with Weitz's (2004) conjecture that women using hair as a rejection of mainstream culture was not a rejection of femininity. Young women and their commenters labeled them as "hot grandmas," and were able to "look sexy and feminine *because* [they] looked different" (85). Sometimes they said this explicitly, as this poster responds to a commenter noting:

**Commenter:** I suppose you're young and pretty enough to pull it off. But I just Don't. Get. This. Trend.

**Poster 2016.39:** @commenter I can totally pull it off. It's violet+silver.

As old women participate in this trend, they frame it in a much different manner, such as "letting go" or "giving in" to their body's ageing process (although, it must be done 'gracefully'), as is illustrated by old women responding to posters to note that they aren't actually going gray yet because they have plans to dye it, or that they dyed it silver in order to avoid gray. These women's conversations were somewhat contradictory; posters claimed they were "embracing" their gray hair by dyeing it silver – which is not the same as "giving in" to graying hair, but instead a new way of performing beauty work to adhere to aesthetic standards of the younger, dominant age group. What appeared to be a challenge to the dictate of not being gray, and to age relations, instead appeared to be more of a combative reluctance to "give in" to naturally occurring gray hair.

As well was the case with old women, granny hair was framed for them by what Ward and Holland (2011) described as "arbiters of women's hair" (302), wherein others (stylists or granddaughters) posted pictures for old women with captions indicating that they are aging well or gracefully, as in the case of the woman whose stylist posted a post-

hairstyling photo with the comment that she was now (after the hair cut) a “silver fox” and “didn’t need an ‘old lady cut.’” As such, younger people posting on behalf of older women emphasized this fight against age, and old women echoed the sentiment of successful aging in their own posts.

As the literature has shown, hair is a cultural symbol that can communicate a person’s social locations and cultural alignments (Barber 2008), but the same hair can mean different things for different people (Synnott 1987), and these meanings can change in response to various social forces (Mageo 1996). However, in the case of granny hair, it seems that the meaning of white and gray hair has not changed much for old women. As Ziff and Rao (1997) discussed, the transfer of cultural objects and the shifts in their meaning are rooted in power relations, and, as is the case here, the appropriation of one cultural symbol, like gray hair, does not challenge the distribution of power, nor does it challenge power relations. Rather, it creates a new cultural narrative by which “cultural minorities are often encouraged, if not obligated to adapt or assimilate the cultural forms and practices of the dominant group” (7). For old women participating in this trend, it is still very much about old age as a devalued social location but generates a modified onus to perform beauty work to reconcile the concomitant loss of status that accompanies it.

This can be seen in the differences in how young and old women frame age with their posts. For young women, gray and white hair is not a marker of age, as they make clear by sexualizing it and associating with their youthful attractiveness. By calling themselves “hot grandmas” and other similar monikers, or even by explicitly commenting that young women can make the look attractive specifically because they are young and attractive, they are distancing themselves from old age and just using gray and white hair

as a stylish fashion. For old women, the meaning attached to gray hair hasn't changed, but the ways in which they must engage in beauty work has been adjusted in that even "letting go" or "giving in" to graying hair (with few exceptions) be mediated by silver highlights and edgy modern haircuts.

*Does gendered ageism occur overtly or through expressions of the second level of ageist discrimination? Do younger and older users (both posters and commenters) contribute to ageism in the same way?*

The ways in which ageist beliefs emerged in this study dovetails with previous research. Consistent with Gimlin's (2002: 48) summation that "women's understanding of beauty is driven by an awareness of social location and cultural distinctions," comments from older women on images of young women with gray hair indicate their awareness of the difference in meaning gray or silver hair has for younger women. As well, young women have a different awareness, noting clear distance between themselves and old age, commenting that because they look beautiful with gray hair in their twenties, they know they'll still be hot and beautiful when their hair goes gray on its own and thus won't be like the bad or unsuccessfully aged people. Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2010) noted that hair becomes more central to the fight against ageism and social exclusion, and as such, I would argue that this knowledge of "the appropriate way to wear one's hair at a given point in one's life" (Gimlin 2002) in order to avoid sanction apparent in older posters and commenters also develops over time as women experience increasing ageism and social exclusion.

How ageist beliefs emerged in this study dovetails with previous research. Consistent with Gimlin's (2002: 48) summation that "women's understanding of beauty is driven by an awareness of social location and cultural distinctions," comments from

older women on images of young women with gray hair indicate their awareness of the difference in meaning gray or silver hair has for younger women. Interestingly, young women don't share this awareness, commenting that because they look beautiful with gray hair in their twenties, they know they'll still be hot and beautiful when their hair goes gray on its own. Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2010) noted that hair becomes more central to the fight against ageism and social exclusion, and as such, I would argue that this knowledge of "the appropriate way to wear one's hair at a given point in one's life" (Gimlin 2002) in order to avoid sanction apparent in older posters and commenters also develops over time as women experience increasing ageism and social exclusion.

Black (2004) found that women continually negotiated their gendered and aged identity not as "a conscious decision-making process but...as the ongoing negotiation between knowledge, skill and performance" (75), one which is shaped by "cultural narratives of age and expectation" (Gullette 2015:12). As such, once women reach the age at which it is clear that they are read as old (and coded as such, as with this study), it is no longer permissible to act as if one is "young" (Calasanti and Slevin 2001), in spite of the continuing pressure to engage in beauty work as a moral imperative (Tanner, Maher, and Fraser 2013, Benbow-Buitenhuis 2014). As such, granny hair, for old women, does not offer a chance for inclusion, but rather changes the "cultural narratives of age" to standards for what beauty work. For example, the cultural narrative of how gray and white hair 'should' look has evolved from how young women are engaging in the granny hair trend, as can be seen through the second level of ageist comments and posts of old women, emphasizing the importance of having an edgy haircut and being a silver fox. Additionally, many of these posts that did not engage with aging or old women

at all revolved around how to achieve the desired shades of gray and silver, or who the best stylists were to create the specific color and style.

*What markers of age do instagram users use to categorize users as old? Do these markers provide a basis for gendered ageism?*

While very few posts received comments that explicitly pointed out other ways by which women are marked as old, it is interesting to note that none of these comments were posted on images of old women. This, I think, also speaks to Gimlin's (2002) assertion that women understand what sort of beauty work is culturally appropriate, based on their social locations, including their age. As well, the importance of all of the ways in which we "do age" (Laz 2003) became prevalent in this study in that instagram users discussed a variety of ways in which women were either distanced from or aligned with old age. In this study, rather than posters and commenters explicitly pointing out other features (aside from gray and white hair) that mark women as old, I found that the ways in which young and old women talk about old age in terms of their gray and white hair delineates when gray or white hair becomes marker of old age, based on other modes of age performance. The appropriate beauty work is just a little different, where now dying graying hair white and silver is appropriate rather than covering with a different color.

Aside from the experiences and conversations on posts of old women posting for themselves, I also found that old women were being spoken for in two ways. First, they were objectified as passive models for hairstylists work, consistent with Gimlin (2002) and Ward and Holland's (2011) research of hairstylists as mediators of appropriate ageing femininity. Not only were old women spoken for by hairstylists posting pictures of their styling work, but also by their granddaughters, who also took to instagram to share images of their grandmothers with white hair. These granddaughters designating

them participants of the #grannyhair trend, and framing them in second level ageist rhetoric, as with this caption of a post featuring an old woman blowing out birthday candles: “Rocking her leopard print vest at 91 years young. Her vim and vigor are enviable.”

In these examples, the hairstylists and grandchildren framed old women as successful agers, emphasizing the decreased importance of chronological age, and implying that these women were *not* aging because of their enviable vim and vigor or sporting a modern haircut (Calasanti 2015, Gilleard and Higgs 2015). At the same time, the framing of their exceptional nature as somehow younger makes clear that the women these women are being depicted in a second level of ageist manner that serves to elevate their value. In this way, age relations that devalue elders is not challenged, but instead, ageism is reinforced as those who do not adhere to the successful ageing paradigm are still devalued (Calasanti 2015).

## **Conclusion**

In this study, I asked: what does the #grannyhair trend mean for gender and age relations? Specifically, does it challenge ageism by altering age-based standards of appearance and presentation for older women? How are boundaries of age-appropriate behaviors maintained by online social network users? In large part my study results are largely consistent with the existing literature. I also found some interactions around the #grannyhair designation that yielded interesting illustrations of gendered age relations previously discussed in the literature.

First, I found that gender and age relations largely remained unchallenged, in the sense that young women engaging in the granny hair trend created distance between

themselves and old age in a way that affirmed their youthful and therefore privileged status. As such, power relations were not challenged. For young women engaging in this trend, dying their hair gray wasn't about challenging age relations, it was only about the style. By contrast, middle-age and old women were significantly more likely to have conversations about age associated with their posts in a way that labeled them as old – in spite of styling their hair in the context of the granny hair trend. Younger posters sexualized and contextualized their gray and white hair in youthful performances in ways that old women did not (or could not, perhaps, as it would not be age-appropriate behavior), creating distance between themselves and old age, and making it clear that the dominant group is not celebrating old women's hair, but rather giving the hair color a new cultural meaning.

Old women are, in the context of a trend that 'celebrates' gray hair, still likely to receive ageist comments (both overt and second level) and engage in preexisting successful aging dialogues that encourages old women to simultaneously age gracefully while not aging at all. Old and middle-aged women engaged in dialogue with younger women about their motivations to "make themselves look older" and expressed incredulity at the decision sport gray hair so early in life. Often ceding that young and beautiful women could pull it off, the overwhelming theme from older posters was that one should have silver hair, and avoid going gray – to avoid losing "the fight." As such, age-based standards of appearance and presentation for older women may have altered slightly, but only to set standards for white and gray hair, rather than covering gray hair altogether.

Boundaries of age-appropriate behaviors enacted in the #grannyhair are largely set by younger users. The ways in which young users utilize ageist stereotypes as a way to emphasize the contrast between their stylistic choices and their status as young attractive women framed the #grannyhair trend as one of appropriation. That is, young women adopted gray, white, and silver hair as a cultural symbol and changed its original meaning as a marker of old age. As such, old women are now faced with either adhering to the new standards of white or gray hair, or face further social exclusion and invisibility.

In spite of social media platforms providing potential to reshape power relations (Dijck and Poell 2013), this study finds that age relations have remained largely untouched in the context of the #grannyhair trend. In fact, just as hairstylists acted as such influential arbiters of style for older women in the real world (Ward and Holland 2011, Gimlin 2002), I find that this sort of limiting of old women's agency and stylistic choice is also limited on social media. Not only do stylists (and family members) arbitrate the appropriate hairstyles for their clients, but they also frame them within a successful aging rhetoric that reinforces the idea that to be old is problematic. Further, given Hine's (2000) argument that virtual identity allows for greater "identity play," further research might explore what the consequences are for old women's virtual identities being commandeered and framed by stylists and young women alike in very specific ways.

Figure 1

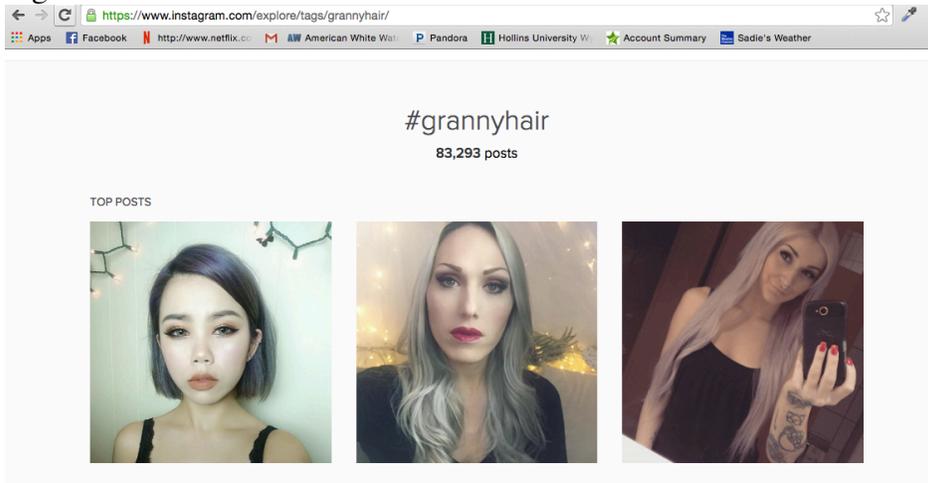


Figure 2

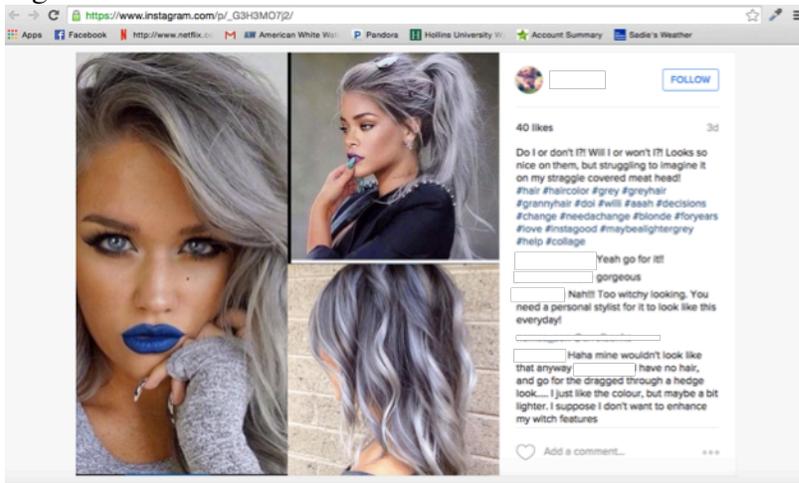


Figure 3

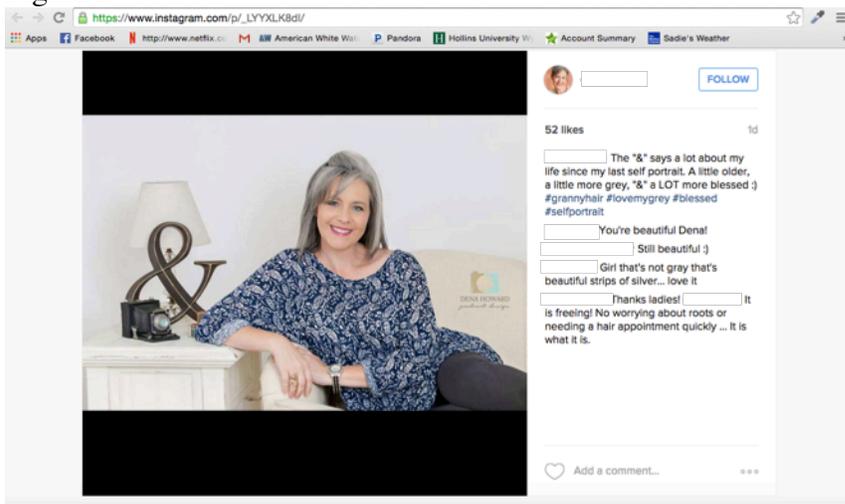
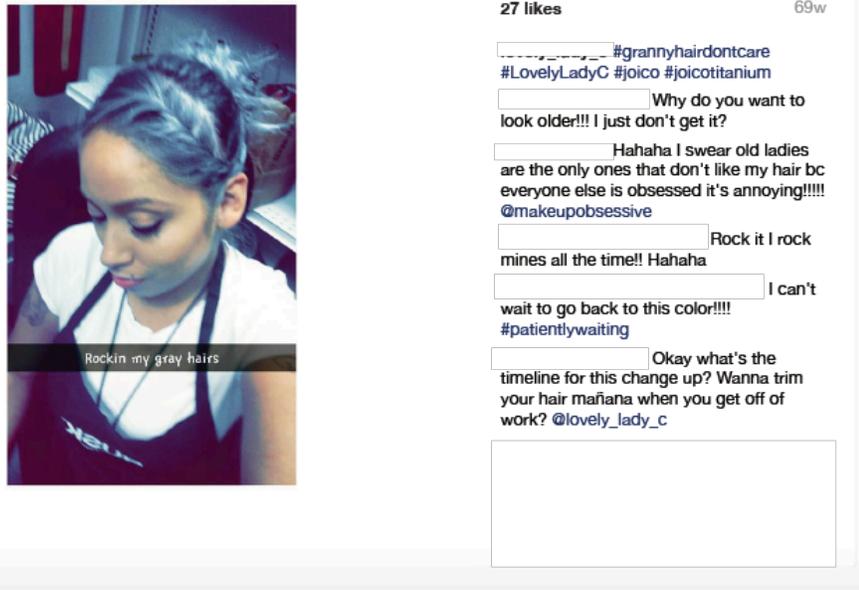


Figure 4



Figure 5



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