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# Reconsidering the double standard of aging: Effects of gender and sexual orientation on facial attractiveness ratings

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## Abstract

This study reconsiders the “double standard of aging” hypothesis, which states that older women are judged as being less attractive than older men. We considered the subjects sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual) and showed that older women were not judged more negatively than older men *per se*. Male subjects exhibited a stronger youth bias than females, but only if the target picture was a potential sexual partner. Females showed an equal amount of preference for youthful faces, independent of the targets sex and regardless of whether the target was a potential sexual partner.

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## 1. Introduction

Studies analyzing attitudes towards aging and the elderly have often found that older women are judged more negatively than older men (e.g., Berman, O’Nan, & Floyd, 1981; Deutsch,

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Zalenski, & Clark, 1986; Laurence, 1964). This phenomenon was first referred to as the “double standard of aging” by Susan Sontag (1972), who suggested that modern urbanized societies allow two standards of male beauty: the boy and the man, but only one standard of female beauty: the girl. An explanation for this is provided by evolutionary theories: they assert that youthfulness is a more salient cue for men than for women when faced with the task of mate selection, due to the fact that women’s fertile years are typically more limited than men’s, and more precipitously terminated by the onset of menopause (cf. Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992).

Previous studies have suggested that men are attracted to relatively younger women (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992), that men place greater emphasis on physical attractiveness because of its value as an age cue (Buss, 1989; Feingold, 1990; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999) and health indicator, that women’s femininity is perceived to decrease with age, which is not the case for men’s masculinity (Deutsch et al., 1986), and that age is a more salient cue for men than for women (Kogan, 1974, 1979). Thus, most studies have been supportive of the double standard of aging hypothesis, although there have been exceptions for attractiveness ratings (Zebrowitz, Olson, & Hoffman, 1993), for attitudes towards the elderly (Kite, Deaux, & Miele, 1991; Öberg & Tornstam, 2003), and for the double standard in self-perceptions (Wilcox, 1997). In general, a more substantial and consistent effect of a double standard of aging was found when photographic stimuli were used as opposed to verbal descriptions (for an overview of the earlier studies see Kogan & Mills, 1992).

In most of these previous studies involving picture ratings, the sexual orientation of the subjects was not recorded and we can thus assume that the subjects were mostly heterosexual. As a consequence, there has mostly been a confound between the sex of the subject and the sex of the target as a potential mate. For male subjects, the targets displaying potential mates were female, and for female subjects, the targets displaying potential mates were male. This confound makes it impossible to tell if the reason for the documented sex of subject by sex of target interaction lies in the target or in the subject. An evolutionary explanation, as proposed for example by Kenrick and Keefe (1992), would suggest that it is due to the subject as it is more important for men than for women that their sexual partner is youthful. But it is also conceivable that sex of subject by sex of target interactions result because women’s appearance is indeed more susceptible to the effects of aging, due for instance to greater physiological or hormonal changes, or that beauty standards are different for men and women through socio-cultural norms.

A study by Silverthorne and Quinsey (2000) included homosexual men and women in their samples and found indeed that the variance could be explained by the subject better than by the target. That is, homosexual and heterosexual men would prefer younger partners of their preferred sex than would homosexual and heterosexual women. However, since Silverthorne and Quinsey asked their participants specifically for ratings of the targets’ *sexual* attractiveness, only the ratings for the preferred sex (opposite sex for heterosexual participants, same sex for homosexual participants) can be interpreted, since the ratings for the targets belonging to the other sex were all very close to the minimum, across all age groups.

The goal of the present study was to elucidate the effect of age on attractiveness ratings for both the preferred and the unpreferred sex. Specifically, we were interested in whether men showed a stronger preference for youthful faces than women in general, even when the face was not a potential mate, or whether the stronger preference for youthfulness was limited to potential mates.

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