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# Tyred out: Natural aging and aesthetic labor in Pirelli's 2017 calendar

Katrina Pritchard<sup>1</sup>  | Rebecca Whiting<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>School of Management, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

<sup>2</sup>Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK

## Correspondence

Katrina Pritchard, School of Management, Swansea University, Swansea SA2 8PP, UK.  
Email: [k.l.pritchard@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:k.l.pritchard@swansea.ac.uk)

## Abstract

We review how natural aging is constructed in contemporary media discourse by examining coverage of the 2017 Pirelli calendar. While highly digitized and provocative representations of youthfulness might be readily associated with this calendar, the 2017 edition featured actors aged 28–71, shot in black and white with limited makeup and apparently no digitization. As older women we reflexively examine this exposure of how women might age naturally; and discursively unpack tensions surrounding understandings of beauty and empowerment across media coverage. We suggest the Pirelli calendar is a complex media production, with impact that extends far beyond the product itself, spreading through the economic system and connecting tyres to art in the process. We progress understandings of aesthetic labor across the lifecourse, offer further development of the beauty and empowerment tensions embedded in the aesthetics of natural aging and explain how natural aging facilitates a multi-layered process of binding.

## KEYWORDS

age, beauty, digitalization, aesthetic labor, qualitative research

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Managing an appropriate aesthetic is problematic for women of all ages (Banet-Weiser, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2019) and particularly for older women (Pritchard & Whiting, 2015), a category we belong to ourselves. Relatedly, research

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has unpacked the pressure on women to remain youthful, without excessive effort or assistance (Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Elias et al., 2017). In contrast, our investigation is prompted by the advance of natural aging as a postfeminist clarion call (Clarke, 2010), one which promises to redefine beauty and empower women to be our (older) selves. We suggest this reflects a maturing of postfeminism, offering us a lifetime of leaning-in (West, 2018). This maturing is not coincidental but reinforces the neoliberal ideal of lifelong self-improvement (Lewis et al., 2017). Conveniently, 'natural' products and services are readily available and increased media visibility of women aging naturally provides inspiration for our efforts (Jones, 2010; Kenalemang, 2021). Our consumption is thus embedded in a wider political economy (Bergeron, 2001; Mavin et al., 2019) such that women's natural aging shores up commercial, social and political institutions or, in lay terms, the patriarchal system (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Byerly & Ross, 2006).

Our research focuses on the Pirelli calendar (2019) as an iconic media representation (Karam, 2013), which in 2017 featured well-known female actors, aged 28–71, shot in black and white with limited makeup and apparently no digitization. As older women ourselves, our interest was piqued by this performance of natural aging, the inclusion of an academic among the female actors and by the extensive media response. We suggest the Pirelli calendar sits at a critical juncture in the political economy of women's media representation (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Each calendar is a complex media production extending beyond the product itself, spreading through the economic system and connecting tyres to art in the process. Moreover the 2017 calendar was promoted as a breakthrough in the representation of older women, showing the empowering beauty of natural aging. Therefore, to explicate this critical juncture, we turn conceptually to aesthetic labor as a means through which to develop understandings of natural aging and its positioning within aesthetic capitalism more widely (Gill & Scharff, 2013; Jones, 2010; Mavin et al., 2019).

Research on aesthetic labor initially focused on 'corporate aesthetics, management ideals or brand identities' (Pettersson McIntyre, 2014, p. 79). Inquiry subsequently expanded to explore both foundational aspects: aesthetics and labor (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020); a line of enquiry we develop in unpacking how laboring is recognized in various aesthetic presentations of natural aging. Our article aims to explicate the tensions experienced when the natural aging of older women comes under scrutiny (Elias et al., 2017). Our overarching research question is thus: How is aesthetic labor implicated in presentations of natural aging? In response, we progress understandings of aesthetic labor across the lifecourse, offer further development of the beauty and empowerment tensions embedded in the aesthetics of natural aging and explain how natural aging facilitates a multi-layered process of binding. We engage in this endeavor reflexively, recognizing that we too are bound, despite our faceless presentation as authors of this article. Below we first conceptually situate our study in relation to existing research on work, aesthetics and age.

## 2 | AESTHETICS, AGE AND THE WORKING WOMAN

There is increasing recognition that 'looking good' is critical throughout contemporary working life (Lewis et al., 2017). Reflecting the increasing emphasis on appearance in contemporary aesthetic capitalism (Mavin et al., 2019), aesthetic labor research stretches from the service industry (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020) to entrepreneurial ventures (Pritchard et al., 2019). While studies of male aesthetic laboring are rare (Ojala et al., 2016), research highlights the impact of expectations of aesthetic labor on working women (Elias et al., 2017; Mavin et al., 2019) not only through the original focus on service work, itself considered gendered (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020), but also because aesthetics are embedded within the construction of gender boundaries (Kelan, 2013). Further explorations have developed the conceptual basis of both 'aesthetic' and 'labor'. This includes examining connections with related concepts, such as biological capital (Pickard, 2018), glamour labor (Wissinger, 2016) and beauty work (Clarke, 2010). These terms share a dual focus on a particular embodiment and how a positive perception of this embodiment is achieved.

Such work not only calls attention to experiences of aesthetic laboring within particular contexts, but also situates such laboring within contemporary neoliberal political economy. Concern with gendered appearance shores up commercial, social and political institutions, is ideologically bound within neoliberal thinking and central to aesthetic

capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Bergeron, 2001; Clarke, 2010). Indeed, aesthetic laboring is required to ensure and secure even temporary access to work (van den Berg & Arts, 2018). As Elias et al. (2017, p. 5, emphasis in original) suggest 'neoliberalism makes us *all* aesthetic entrepreneurs' and positions aesthetic labor as essential self-work to achieve the ideal of fit, youthful and beautiful (Duffy & Hund, 2019), an aspect we flesh out further below. Relatedly, there has been a particular concern with younger women's laboring (Drenten et al., 2020; Duffy & Hund, 2019) and older women's maintenance of youthfulness (Benbow-Buitenhuis, 2014; Clarke, 2010) especially as working lives are chronologically extended (Pickard, 2018).

Across all ages and forms of labor, both neoliberal and postfeminist emphasizes on individual choice are mutually reinforcing (Lewis et al., 2017). Significantly for conceptions of aesthetic labor, a postfeminist, neoliberal sensitivity enables a shift from employer oversight to 'self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline' (Gill & Scharff, 2013, p. 4). Individuals must not only align themselves with desirable goals, but also demonstrate effort and freely invest resources to achieve these (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Contemporary consumer culture offers the means to achieve these aesthetic goals, while the political economy of the media keeps such goals prominently displayed for assessment and aspirational purposes (Elias et al., 2017; Jones, 2010). Commercial products and services offer the prospect of the best possible self, while maintaining an illusion of choice (Benbow-Buitenhuis, 2014), choice clearly shaped through media including representations of natural aging, as we explore further below. Products and services include 'hair dye, makeup, cosmetic surgery, and non-surgical cosmetic procedures' (Clarke & Griffin, 2008, p. 653), newly packaged as 'tweakments' (Sawyer, 2020), together with media advice that is integral to makeover culture (Jones, 2010). Feminism is thus 'a consumer-oriented activity' (Rasmussen, 2017, p. 149) with 'emancipation [y]ing in the hands of the women themselves' (Lazar, 2011, p. 42). Moreover, aesthetic laboring, our daily decisions on how we manage our bodies is now openly displayed and scrutinized (Drenten et al., 2020). We are subject to ongoing (self) scrutiny, often technologically enabled and played out in contemporary media contexts (Banet-Weiser, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Of relevance here is an increasing emphasis on naturalness and authentic presentation. The makeup-free movement (Jermyn, 2020) raises the stakes in how women are scrutinized, adding new expectations (Banet-Weiser, 2017). As a result, aesthetic laboring in the public eye has become a particular challenge (Byerly & Ross, 2006). For example, research with Instagram content creators highlights how women face a no-win 'authenticity bind' (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 4985) and engage in 'strategic acts of revelation and concealment' (p. 4997). This struggle reflects how women are scrutinized and how looking fake can be censored (Clarke, 2010). Women must labor (just) enough to secure an appropriately 'real' presentation (Elias et al., 2017), with both the individual's appearance and how this is presented (e.g., via digital media) passing this 'realness' test. In this way, related notions of authenticity embedded within emotional labor are extended to aesthetic labor and even labeled as a distinctive form: authenticity labor (Maares et al., 2020).

This issue of authenticity is not simply an aesthetic judgment but involves further scrutiny of agency; some representations may be seen as dependent on the work of, or guided by, others. Significantly, the agentic laboring might be attributed elsewhere. Examples include the (usually female) role of muse (Koda & Yohannan, 2009), the supermodel's catwalk performance or, as in our research, the female actor posing for the photographer. As Entwistle and Wissinger (2013, p. 4) suggest, models and actors may be 'caught within "the gaze", mute and without subjectivity' in ways that complicate our understandings of aesthetic laboring and invite further scrutiny. Thus, the gendering of agency becomes significant and is deeply embedded in our appraisal of visual performances such as the Pirelli calendar (Jermyn, 2020; Karam, 2013). Significantly, tensions between aging, agency and authenticity arise here, as age-appropriate appearance and age-appropriate laboring have emerged as new ways of scrutinizing women and assessing their agency.

Traditionally, aging is associated with aesthetic loss, itself a surface-level indicator of substantive decline (Tomkins & Pritchard, 2019). For many years, encouraged by the beauty industry, older women have labored to preserve a youthful appearance (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). Wrinkles, weight gain and graying hair highlight that older women are unruly; aesthetic labor is required not to enhance value but prevent it slipping away (Clarke, 2010). Older women must therefore continually engage in appropriate aesthetic labor to avoid censure (Benbow-Buitenhuis, 2014). When

workers are literally 'the face' of an endeavor, such as models and actors, this is even more acutely felt (Koda & Yohannan, 2009). While the work involved might be more extensive as we age, the means are available for those with the resources (time, money and energy) to invest. Authenticity is again implicated as women must manage tensions to appropriately align how they look and feel. The related rhetoric of successful aging allies with the neoliberal and postfeminist emphasis on individual choice, and therefore appears as a euphemism for not-aging at all (Pritchard & Whiting, 2015). The health and financial requirements of successful aging are positioned as issues we must attend to in our younger days. As we explore later, we suggest that natural aging sets up the need for similar attention to our appearance; as something requiring lifelong effort.

Looking younger still offers opportunities to claim the beneficial attributes of a younger body and mind. Yet misalignment to chronological age can be censored; women must not appear to be faking it (Benbow-Buitenhuis, 2014). Success depends on the outcome being judged as natural; and the aesthetic laboring as authentic (Benbow-Buitenhuis, 2014; Rasmussen, 2017). However, as we explore below, when images such as those within the 2017 Pirelli calendar become the basis for these judgments, this is increasingly problematic for 'ordinary' women. We therefore highlight how this representational aspect of naturalness relates to media imagery (Banet-Weiser, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2019). Naturalness itself is commercialized, exploited by beauty companies who promote 'real' women (Gill & Elias, 2014), but also through understandings of image manipulation. The use of Photoshop and social media filters are now commonplace (Pritchard & Whiting, 2017a). As Jones (2013, p. 22, original emphasis) observes 'we now expect that adjustment has happened, even as we continue to demand that photographs represent the real'. In this way image production might be regarded as much a part of aesthetic laboring as hair and makeup. The older woman is thus a site of aesthetic laboring encompassing a range of practices that extend into the digital. This is particularly the case for iconic presentations, such as in the 2017 Pirelli calendar.

### 3 | THE PIRELLI CALENDAR

From our synthesis above, we can see that natural beauty and aging are not neutral (Lewis et al., 2017). Unpacking naturalness highlights understandings of 'real' women and our perceptions of 'normal' appearance in relation to age and gender. Our empirical site enables us to unpack aesthetic laboring, both component terms and their interrelationship, as the calendar claims to promote natural aging in ways that redefine beauty and empower women.

Originating in 1964, today's Pirelli calendar (The Cal™) is a multifaceted production with a website, launch parties, films, press conferences and exhibitions (Karam, 2013). For many, it is synonymous with provocative images of young women (Lewis et al., 2017). However, the 2017 calendar, 'Emotional', featuring mainly female actors, claimed to present an authentic aesthetic and 'featured more women in their 70s than in their 20s' (D'Averc, 2017). D'Averc (2017) was one of many reporting the photographer's vision (the late Peter Lindbergh):

I wanted to show women in a different way...I feel I have a responsibility to free women from the idea of eternal youth and perfection. Society's ideal of perfection is impossible to achieve.

Calendars, include Pirelli editions, have been widely studied as a media format (Jermyn & Jerslev, 2017; Karabacak, 2019; Karam, 2013) while Jermyn (2020) considered how the wider makeup-free movement paved the way for the 2017 calendar. As outlined above, we suggest that the calendar sits at a critical juncture within media culture and, with its claim to show the empowering beauty of natural aging, provides a significant opportunity for exploring and developing understandings of aesthetic laboring.

## 4 | METHODS

We adopt a two-part approach, considering the launch of the 2017 Pirelli calendar as a discursive event. An event perspective is particularly suited to online media (Maaranen & Tienari, 2020) and involves collecting data over an event-specific timeframe. The first part of our event-based approach summarizes our own critical reflexive engagement with the calendar. Recognizing our position as older working women and acknowledging the impossibility of separating ourselves from our research, we reflect on our own response to the calendar. This includes a visual review of the images (using Davison's 2010 portraiture codes), our own autoethnographic consideration of aesthetic laboring using daily selfies (Pritchard & Whiting, 2017b) and retrospective adaptation of Gilmore and Kenny's (2015) 'collective reflection' practice as we wrote this article. Presenting this before our more traditional discursive analysis offers the reader the opportunity to engage with our relationship to the calendar, and to natural aging as shaping our own identities.

The second part focuses on the discursive response to the calendar across online news. Online news now exceeds print readership, and also extends participation via reader comments. We used web tools to identify relevant English language online media coverage (Whiting & Pritchard, 2020) of the 2017 Pirelli calendar between November 2016 and February 2017, building a discursive event database (Hardy & Maguire, 2010) comprising 53 articles and accompanying comments (see Table 1). We excluded repeats of syndicated articles or press releases as our qualitative investigation did not consider volume of coverage. However, we were interested in different types of media and reactions posted directly as comments. In extracts presented below, we indicate the source either from an online media text (e.g. [S2]) or a comment posted in relation to a specific text (e.g. [S32C]).

Iterative data analysis reflected the different types of data (media texts and reader comments) and their inter-relationship. Initially we worked, separately and together, to make sense of the data and develop a descriptive coding framework which highlighted the topics of beauty and empowerment. As widely acknowledged, different (and overlapping) types of discourse analysis share a foundation in social constructionism, and our approach involved close reading by both authors, we then came together to review the analysis in 'circular movements between an overall understanding and closer textual analysis' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 153). This focused on unpacking the representations and an emergent attention to tensions, recognizing that areas of debate provide a rich seam for discourse analysis since tensions are 'made sense of in and through discourse' (Sheep et al., 2017, p. 464).

TABLE 1 Discursive event dataset

Data type	Data categories	Data description
Online media texts [52]	Mainstream news media (e.g., CNN, Daily Mail) [26]; Entertainment/celebrity media either within mainstream news or individual online sites. [18]; Specialist media: fashion (e.g., Vogue), photography or general arts. [8]	News-style reporting with variation in focus depending on title; reuse of Pirelli press release and publicity material used with additional commentary; Image rich (including events and related images of those featured)
Online comments [497 across 8 online media texts]	Comments posted on a range of sources from mainstream news (such as Daily Mail, Yahoo and Guardian) to more specialist outlets (photography, fashion).	Fragmentary and multi-vocal texts; Responsive to online articles and/or earlier posted comments

## 5 | FINDINGS

Our findings are offered in two parts. Firstly, we present our critical reflexive engagement and secondly our discursive analysis, the latter organized around two tensions. Through analyzing these complex tensions – labeled *beauty* and *empowerment* – we further unpick how aesthetic laboring was implicated in these presentations of natural aging. Within our findings we follow various threads within these tensions to highlight how, and for whom, such laboring is recognized or denied and when various forms of such laboring might be both absent and present.

### 5.1 | Part one: critical reflection

During our autoethnographic undertaking we noted a sense of discomfort related to both the taking of selfies and then our re-viewing of them for analysis. Despite both of us having public facing roles, aesthetic laboring is not something we feel comes naturally. Indeed, we noted we attempted to display and embody enthusiasm for the role through our own appearance; but also, that we struggled with this and seemed continually tired (or perhaps tired). As women now in our late 50s, this sense of tiredness, and experience of the everyday demands of aesthetic labor, offers a position from which we approached the Pirelli calendar.

We were both aware of the calendar through news media, but before starting the data collection reviewed the Pirelli calendar website (2019), including the making-of video. From this we were intrigued by the artistic endeavor which seemed somehow removed from our own aesthetic laboring, an issue highlighted by the apparent inclusion of a female academic in the calendar (although we struggled to find images of them across the media or on Pirelli's own website). For further scrutiny of the calendar, we then used Davison's (2010) visual portraiture codes (physical, dress, interpersonal and spatial) to prompt our reflection.

While each actress is portrayed differently, common aspects of pose and composition stood out. To us, the women were often wearing very little, clothes seemed thin and were often shown falling off shoulders. While not directly comparable to the glamour model shots of old, there was still a sense of physical exposure across the calendar, and certainly compared to our own more 'practical' dress sense. Most images showed windswept or ruffled hair, with the women often touching this or their faces emphasizing a delicate femininity, while gazing directly at the camera (Goffman, 1979). While we are accustomed to looking windswept ourselves, this usually results from an outdoor hike, rather than anything that we might label feminine or delicate. So, although these were not traditional red-carpet presentations of these women, their model-like proportions and beauty (even of the 'special guest' female academic) still seemed very evident. In short, there was little in the calendar that felt like aging naturally to us.

We further reflected on the broader positioning of these images as beautiful and empowering, situating them in relation to the production of the calendar itself as well as our wider understanding of the political economy of women's media representation (Byerly & Ross, 2006). While we don't know the relationships here, the presentation of these images as the creative work of the male photographer intrigued, and even frustrated and angered us. The idea of being somehow inspired to see our current or future selves reflected in these images of incredibly beautiful and slim (predominately white) women who seemed to move in a world so far removed from our own as second-career academics seemed rather preposterous to us.

### 5.2 | Part two: discourse analysis

#### 5.2.1 | The beauty tension

Here we return to our discourse analysis and review tensions embedded in understandings of beauty, specifically the beauty in this presentation of natural aging. Across these data, beauty as an outcome of the photographer's

creative labor was applauded, the women's appearance is attributed to his work. Our data highlighted this as beauty in different form:

This was one of the most famous celebrations of high-fashion female beauty making a clear statement: our definition of beauty has changed. [S11]

This recognizes the 'old' calendar but also allows for a wider reading: we have all changed. This is reinforced as the article highlights this beauty as 'untouched' and showcasing 'older women'. Flexibly, 'untouched' can refer both to digital and cosmetic treatment. In this way the calendar's naturalness offers an alternative:

...in a world where women often resort to cosmetics and plastic surgery in search of an artificial kind of perfection. [S9]

Makeup and plastic surgery are combined as similarly artificial, or unnatural 'tools' of aesthetic labor, and offered in contrast to natural aging. The use of "resort" suggests this might be the desperate act of women who have not worked early, or hard, enough or who are not able to invest sufficiently or appropriately to achieve this naturally.

These 'older women' were said to "grace the 2017 calendar in their natural, un-airbrushed glory, a wrinkle or two evident, freckles, and liver spots unconcealed" [S32]; observing that the images "show wrinkles can be glamorous" [S43] or portrayed an "aura of majesty" [S3]. It was suggested that the calendar was "proof beauty is not defined by age" [S17], noting that one of the named (and aged) female actors "continues to stun" [S17]. Through their natural aging these women were thus positioned as glamorous, regal and graceful; terms that invoke an easy, almost effortless beauty; little 'laboring' seems to have taken place. Through this, the perpetual and everyday labor likely to be required over an extended period is also rendered invisible. This offers the possibility that their appearance is normal, natural and indeed representative of others' reality of aging.

We found that positive reader comments also focused more explicitly on the women portrayed, often commenting on individual images to reinforce visual assessment:

She is a very attractive elder. She looks great for her age. [S18C]

Here beauty is linked explicitly to age, setting up the potential for comparison to past calendar images as well as the individual's younger self. For example, 2017 was lauded for challenging the idea of beauty being "scantly clad or youthful or fake" [S12], terms that can then be attributed to both the images and the women themselves.

And yet the need for these women to conform with the traditional calendar as sexy does not disappear; rather this new natural beauty is also sexy:

Natural IS the new beautiful, without a doubt. It is real, authentic, honest and far more sexy! [S32C]

However, particularly among reader comments there were direct attacks on the women's appearance, both generally and in these images:

Who wants a "Grab a Granny" Pirelli calendar? [S34C]

The recipients don't want to see middle aged women being themselves... they want something new and exciting and different and good looking women. [S7C]

Both the calendar and these women are unwanted; due to their age and lack of beauty, these are not "good looking women". Both directly and hedged, younger more "exciting" women are preferred yet these comments' authors



distance themselves from those who are exercising this preference; through invoking a generic audience. Thus, the perpetual gaze of the other as the arbiter of beauty is established.

Nevertheless, these women are held directly accountable for their appearance in the calendar, often with a particular focus on age, for example, "she has more lines and wrinkles than my ninety-year-old mother" [S18C]. In contrast to the claim that standards of beauty have changed, here women can still be found to be wanting.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then this naturalness was a significant area of tension within understandings of beauty. A stated lack of makeup acted to confirm an absence of aesthetic laboring; these women were judged as simply and effortlessly beautiful. They were described as "bare faced"[S21], "without a single drop of makeup" [S20] or with "minimal hair and makeup" [S36]. In this way 'natural' is constructed as what exists underneath (e.g., makeup) and can therefore simply be exposed, here by the male photographer (considered further below). This underlying naturalness was reinforced referring to these as "raw untouched photographs" [S47].

However, evidence of makeup and some digital work was used to highlight that too much aesthetic laboring is involved, including by makeup artists, for the images to be regarded as natural:

She has clearly got makeup on, her eyes are like panda's and her skin is airbrushed. [S22C]

The calendar's red-carpet launch also featured in our data including many images of these female actors in stunning dresses, full hair and makeup, with one described, for example, as "dazzl[ing] in her slinky sequined floor length gown" [S1]. This alternate presentation acted to confirm their underlying natural beauty by offering an alternative aesthetic laboring that fitted with glamorous red-carpet events attended as female actors. However, this link to acting also potentially undermined their naturalness:

[I]t's pretty amazing, they all look beautiful and the photography is obviously absolutely first class. But... it's somewhat ironic to shoot actresses and then say fake and make believe is ugly or not beautiful. Lol, that is what they do for a living and is what they have been chosen for! And don't be fooled, there IS retouching. There IS makeup. [S7C]

Here these women's aesthetic laboring is called out, since it is fundamental to "what they do for a living"; to suggest it is absent seems nonsensical: their naturalness is not uncovered, it is manufactured. We note here the shift away from the photographer and photographic to other areas of these women's lives.

In this vein, it was suggested that these women's aging naturally was itself fake:

Why do you brag about natural and unretouched images while those celebrities spend hundreds of thousands of \$ on cosmetic and plastic surgeries to try to look "younger"...I mean, seriously [name] can't even perform facial expression these days. [S7C]

Most of the women selected for the new calendar seem unrecognisable from their youth. Not because of the ageing process. Due to surgery. [S34C]

Too much aesthetic laboring is seen as inherently unnatural. Makeup is no longer the arbiter of naturalness; more fundamental issues are at stake. Extensive cosmetic work is also contrasted with aging naturally; youth is neither honored nor preserved by these interventions. Having reviewed the beauty tension across these media, we now consider empowerment below.

## 5.2.2 | The empowerment tension

Media coverage often set up the calendar's portrayal of beauty and natural aging as universally empowering, adopting an inclusive style:

Images of women owning the reality that we age, we droop, we wrinkle, yet we remain confident of our allure can be deeply empowering. They reinforce our sense of agency: we are sexy, no matter what our age, because we feel sexy, we feel strong, and we feel confident. [S32]

Here, these female actors are said to 'own' their own natural aging, and their individual empowerment can then be shared with all. 'We' are invited to 'feel' a certain way; notably sexy, strong and confident which blends the calendar's sexy past with this new empowering vision. Moreover, this connects to 'our sense of agency' as data include the claim that these images:

normalize the humanity of women... emphasise that youth shouldn't be the sole aspiration forced upon women. [S23]

This is empowering simply by being an alternative aspiration but while not directly acknowledged, this highlights how women are at risk of subjectification. Indeed, the Pirelli calendar, which previously could be said to have 'forced' one aspiration, is here credited as the vehicle of freedom.

To emphasize the empowering potential, we see efforts positioning these famous actors as "relatable women" [S33]. This drew on their feminine labor; for example, one applauded for being photographed "after a knacker night of childcare" [S46]. Invoking mothering not only increases their relatability but also provides a potential caveat to their natural aging and inoculates against critique due to the challenging context. The article goes on to note that it is:

the sort of sexiness that we come across with the women we interact with in everyday life that's celebrated here. [S46]

This aspirational sexiness is empowering since we can all, apparently, achieve this even if we are tired from domestic responsibilities. If it is possible to be naturally sexy after a night of childcare, then surely this is something every woman can achieve? The initially broad construct of empowerment thus takes shape, notably in terms of sexiness and desirability. As with our previous examination of 'beauty', this thread of sexiness runs through these data.

The female actors' careers were also enrolled to bolster a construction of empowering role models. Acting is transposed to become part of the empowerment discourse: they were "powerhouse actresses" [S7] who regularly portrayed strong women, including the "terrifying heroine" [S6]. Repurposing this artistic labor and applying these 'strong' analogies usefully combats any discursive association of age and frailty which could have been exposed in these 'natural' portraits. Rather empowerment is reinforced by building capability from other activities to bolster the calendar's impact.

In this way, these female actors were "an inspiration to women everywhere" [S8C]. These images were held as representing "all an actress should aspire to be" [S28C] but also inspiring all women, particularly as regards aging: "I hope I can look almost as good as her when I hit my 70s" [S18C]. This was supported as commenters shared personal experiences of going natural or makeup free:

No makeup for me! I feel 'fake' when I wear it. Besides, I am confident enough to NOT wear it. I LOVE myself, inside & out don't need any warpaint. Makeup says...you're not 'pretty' enough unless you wear it. Grow some confidence. [S20C]

Being natural demonstrates confidence in the expression of one's true natural self, while wearing makeup is said to indicate failure that should be addressed by individual growth. These role models empower others by revealing this truth.

However, this enthusiasm was not shared by all, highlighting tensions within understandings of empowerment:

If I see another bloody tweet telling me they are 'empowering' I'll scream. They are only empowering to the famous and attractive women in the photos. [S34C]

This directly contradicts suggestions that these "famous and attractive women" can stand for all women or be accessible role models. Here a tension emerges as online critique contests that these images are, and the calendar itself is, different:

It's the same old world of onlookers consuming and judging flat images of women's bodies: absurdly beautiful women, who are obliged to spend hours on diet and skincare as part of their job, many of whom have been "helped along" by surgery...these images having been lauded as "a revolution" and "a strike against sexist imagery", I've been looking back at some old Pirelli calendars to get a sense of how much they've changed. The answer is: not as much as you'd think. [S34]

This text exposes the more fundamental aesthetic laboring of the female actors, positioned as "part of their job", separating them from other women. This is laboring as far more extensive and intense, simply shunning makeup for one photoshoot does not allow a claim to be natural. Such aesthetic laboring is initially positioned occupationally, outlining a wide range of activities and interventions including being "helped along by surgery". This further contests that these images empower 'ordinary' women to age naturally and continuity with previous calendars is highlighted: the nature of the images and the display of these images for judgment.

Another article highlighted the continuing problematic focus on beauty, here directly critiquing the (male) photographer's intent in relation to the production of these images:

Exactly what [the] photographer...can mean when he says that he wanted to portray a "different beauty, more real and truthful and not manipulated by commercial or any other interests," given that he has just photographed a series of women considered to be among the most beautiful in the world, in a high-budget photoshoot involving professional lighting and hair and wardrobe artists, for a corporate calendar operating in a male-dominated industry... There has been a narrative of late that it is OK to place a woman's value in her beauty and sex appeal as long as we don't dictate what that should look like; as long as we don't say that women have to be skinny and young and blonde and toned and white in order to be beautiful. [S5]

This highlights the photographer, other workers and industry context, perhaps ironically, relegating those featured to "a series of women" and the role of muse. Nevertheless, the separation of these women directly (as the most beautiful in the world) and indirectly (via the range of artistic and aesthetic laboring) situates and specifies empowerment and its limits (being sexy). This is one of the few media texts to engage with the calendar's commercial orientation and "male-dominated industry", a position we set out academically earlier.

However, the photographer was also lauded for "keeping his models fully clothed" [S12] and for deciding to "free women" [S3]. In describing the artistic mission, most online media drew directly on the Pirelli press release and the photographer's stated vision (noted earlier). His artistic endeavor was unquestioned, "you get to see [photographer] at work" [S7]; while the unnamed female actors are passive subjects. "His models" are muse; their participation here not recognized as work. This enables a separation between these women as empowering and the images of these

women in this particular presentation as empowering. The women are in fact passive, and the empowerment is achieved through the actions of the male photographer.

Critical coverage challenged the rationale for attending to aging simply to tick a diversity box; as one article put it, Pirelli “is jumping on a bandwagon rather than taking a brave stand” [S36]. Indeed, attending to natural aging in this way was perceived as hardly a stretch for the calendar:

All the women featured are classically beautiful, slim, cis, able-bodied, and the overwhelming majority are white...if we were waiting for Pirelli’s feminist revolution, this isn’t it. [S14]

This article highlights boundaries for the proposed empowerment; it is restricted to those who largely already meet certain norms. Such images offer only limited empowerment to very few women with the considerable (genetic and financial) resources necessary to achieve this natural appearance. At the same time, critical commentary highlights that valuing beauty might be disempowering, particularly to those whose own situations were far from those reflected in these ideals.

Critical reader comments were found across the media texts, though were more frequent when echoing a critical tone in the corresponding article. These pushed back on the notion of empowerment and/or representation, particularly challenging the role of the male photographer:

Get real! What a stretch! No woman has ever been “empowered” by a dude who used to market soft porn taking a faux all-natural flattering photo of her. [S7C]

This comment also contests the implicit association between appearance and being empowered; elsewhere we have noted that in any case perceived empowerment is presented as limited to, for example, rising to the challenges of motherhood or taking on acting roles of strong women. Interestingly within these more critical comments, the women featured do not appear to be more active or agentic. They were also criticized for being ‘faux’. For example, comments directly challenged the authenticity of the female actors, many of whom also appeared in adverts and promotions for the beauty industry:

How ridiculous of her to say it would be wonderful to ditch makeup; she works for L’Oréal. [S18C]

Indeed, rather than the ‘realness’ promised by the photographer this critique suggests that these women might still be acting; simply offering an image appropriate to the context, here an image of natural aging.

Our two-part analysis has unpacked aesthetic laboring in these presentations of natural aging focusing first on tensions around beauty and then empowerment. Despite the calendar purporting to show the empowering beauty of natural aging, our own critical reflection was that there was very little in it that looked natural or felt like aging. Rather, it seemed to us preposterous (disempowering even) that this future was being heralded by a male photographer via images of exceptionally beautiful, slim, predominantly white women. Our discursive analysis unpicked how these images might be seen as images of beauty in their depiction of natural aging, exploring how naturalness and beauty were discursively positioned. Secondly, we examined how these images, and sometimes the women within them, were presented as empowering. Tensions here focused on the relation between these women and all women as well as the role of such images in empowerment more broadly.

## 6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our research investigates the 2017 Pirelli calendar, which claimed to redefine beauty and empower women through its focus on natural aging. We suggest this reflects a potential 'maturing' of postfeminism, one that not only enrolls older consumers, but sets up an aspirational goal to work toward for women of all ages. In neoliberal times, aesthetic laboring is not contained within employment or enterprise, or in respect to a specific activity, rather laboring is embedded in all aspects of our lives, and for all our lives (Elias et al., 2017).

In addressing how aesthetic labor(ing) is implicated in presentations of natural aging, our first theoretical contribution is to show how this has emerged as a significant discourse, here conveyed in calendar form, which shapes aesthetic laboring across the lifecourse. Moreover, given the connectivity between postfeminism and neoliberal ideals (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Lewis et al., 2017), we suggest that the Pirelli calendar sits at a critical juncture within the political economy of women's media representation (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Mavin et al., 2019). Through our reflexive and discursive analysis of the calendar, we therefore offer a conceptual contribution through explicating how norms of natural aging spread across these media. This allows us to advance understandings of the beauty and empowerment tensions that are embedded in the portrayal of natural aging (Clarke, 2010).

Building on these contributions, we propose that both natural aging as an overarching discourse and specific discursive events such as the Pirelli calendar set up the possibility of a continual and multi-layered process of binding for women of all ages. We offer a new theorization of this process of binding which develops previously proposed double-binds (Benbow-Buitenhuys, 2014; Duffy & Hund, 2019). We suggest that through depictions of 'aging naturally' women are continually bound to processes of consumption, with discourses of beauty and empowerment tightening rather than loosening these binds. Finally, we revisit our own reflexive positioning, as older women who are 'tired' out.

### 6.1 | Natural aging as shaping aesthetic laboring across the lifecourse

Our first theoretical contribution is to highlight the importance of adding a longer-term temporal perspective to the conceptualization of aesthetic laboring. While aesthetic laboring is much studied, work has highlighted age specific laboring, with more attention to younger than older women (Clarke, 2010; Drenten et al., 2020; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Elias et al., 2017). Moreover, research has focused on immediate and present experience (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). Even that which has highlighted ongoing demands has situated this within a contemporaneous timeframe (van den Berg & Arts, 2018). While this remains important, we illustrate the need to additionally consider the longer-term temporal framing of aesthetic laboring. Even if natural aging impacts only older women, this would be significant given the wide age range within this category (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). But this impact is even more widely felt as the aspiration of natural aging (and related positioning of beauty and empowerment as unpacked below) emerges as a goal to be worked toward for all ages across the lifecourse. Our analysis highlights how this lifelong goal is established as requiring work at any age by threading 'sexiness' through depictions of natural aging. This offers a direct connection with previous 'youthful' Pirelli calendars while positioning an alternative possibility to discourses of decline in which sexuality becomes erased with age (Clarke, 2010; Jermyn & Jerslev, 2017). What is offered is a new form of aspirational natural sexiness, yet one which is passive, and in its passivity can further be read as authentic (Maares et al., 2020). Women are advised to avoid resorting to inauthentic plastic surgery, since this can rarely survive the scrutinizing gaze, now enabled via high quality images and across interconnected media (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Yet women are also warned that this might end up as the only means of achieving such beauty if they do not heed advice to follow a natural path from an early age. Moreover, consistent visualization presents 'aging' as a universal process, experienced by all, continually and at any age. This then provides for the continual and persistent need to be alert to the goal of natural aging across the lifecourse. Applying contemporary theorizing in relation to our explication of

aging naturally, there is a recursivity at play here. Aging naturally both shapes and is shaped by networked media; and is significant beyond the instance of the 2017 Pirelli calendar. We examine this further below.

## 6.2 | Explicating a critical juncture in media networks: unpacking beauty and empowerment effects

The Pirelli calendar is itself a complex and multifaceted product, situated within the political economy of women's media representations, connecting worlds as apparently disparate as tyres and art (Jermyn & Jerslev, 2017; Karam, 2013). Through its wide coverage and association with high profile women, themselves further networked within media through the films that they star in and the cosmetics they promote, the calendar is positioned at a nexus connecting commercial networks (Bergeron, 2001; Mavin et al., 2019). Via both positive and critical media coverage, this network spreads to include the engagement of readers, whose gaze is made visible via their comments posted across various media (Pritchard et al., 2019; Pritchard & Whiting, 2015). Its position at a critical juncture amplifies the impact of the Pirelli calendar; likewise, how beauty and empowerment are associated with the goal of natural aging. The potential censoring gaze is also widely spread and becomes possible for those situated at some distance from the calendar itself.

Importantly, our findings here offer insight into the gendered ways in which aesthetic laboring is attributed and denied in relation to natural aging (Clarke, 2010). It is through these processes of attribution and denial that women of all ages become subjectified and positioned under the male gaze (Pritchard & Whiting, 2015). For example, in offering these images as beautiful, the photographer is credited with 'revealing' and 'allowing' a display. This highlights that (even empowered, confident) women cannot act alone and require assistance. However, we suggest that attention to the artistic role of the male photographer is only one layer of gendered relations at stake here (Kelan, 2013). While this aspect is not insignificant, there is a risk that attending to the specific role of this one man and his artistic gaze obscures further interrogation of the network positioning of these women.

Positive media commentary applauds the grace and dignity of these images, constructing natural aging as quiet beauty (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). However, this downplays women's presentational efforts, and they are disassociated from any laboring. Conversely, when the beauty of these images is contested, the women, labor and their images are reunited and the women themselves are held accountable for their appearance (Elias et al., 2017). Such critique often targeted the wrong type or amount of aesthetic laboring; critique enabled by high resolution images facilitating close scrutiny (Clarke, 2010). Our analysis extends understandings of gendered attributions of aesthetic laboring by demonstrating how these continually disadvantage women who are presented for scrutiny and found passive in their beauty and active in its lack across contemporary media networks (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Much was made of the empowering potential of representations of natural aging in these images (Gill & Elias, 2014; Jermyn, 2020). Ordinary women were said to relate to these images, embrace their own natural aging, thereby freeing themselves. Yet, as suggested above and developed further below, this freedom is illusory. The empowering potential of the images did not stand alone, it was networked through drawing on the female actors' resilience (e.g., as a working mother) and their career success (roles playing strong women). Moreover, much media coverage highlighted the female actors' professional 'red-carpet' aesthetic laboring. This had the effect of further bolstering the notion that these women were 'revealed' within the calendar while capitalizing on the potential empowering effect drawn from an association with their acting. The need for such bolstering further emphasizes the passive positioning within the calendar itself. This highlights a problem with the notion of empowerment proffered here, since ordinary women may not be able to draw simultaneously on natural aging and these 'stronger' displays; rather they may become stuck in the passive position associated with this beauty outcome (Gill & Elias, 2014). Our analysis provides insight into the ways in which representations at such critical junctures both draw on and influence media more widely to establish beauty and empowerment outcomes.

### 6.3 | Natural aging facilitates a multi-layered process of binding

Previous conceptions of aesthetic laboring have identified the demands on women's presentations in an immediate context of a particular situated performance (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020; van den Berg & Arts, 2018). In emphasizing both the importance of extended temporal framing and recognizing the networked nature of media representations, we highlight the need to widen our consideration of the way in which aesthetic laboring traps us (Elias et al., 2017). We suggest understanding aesthetic laboring as an ongoing process of binding which interweaves multiple threads experienced across the lifecourse. As each new, or even nuanced, aspiration spreads across media and commercial networks (Banet-Weiser, 2018), women are required to reassess and recommit to new forms of aesthetic laboring, or else be found wanting. However, in this reassessment, they (we) may need to shed a previous version of themselves to release a (now apparently devalued) thread or bind. This sets up a dilemma since to do so confers a risk: the risk that their new selves might be less appealing or convincing. A partial reinvention of oneself risks an unsatisfactory aesthetic no-woman's land; while to reject new aesthetic goals is to fail to fit in with expected norms, norms now continually scrutinized across media's gaze. However, the new version may only be temporary or fleeting, as producing new aspirations is a never-ending commercial and media venture and so security of self is never obtained. All avenues open the potential—either now or critically at some distant place or future time—of aesthetic failure. We suggest that women are therefore bound to a never-ending, no-win scenario of aesthetic laboring, with the need to continually assess the potential for aesthetic failure and constantly attempt to mitigate this risk. No wonder we are tired.

And so where does this leave us, as older women academics? We acknowledge feeling frustrated by the calendar and its coverage, but also by critique which did little to unpack or address women's subjectification. Perhaps this reflects our own fragile sense of self, and awareness that we will never look like these images but also a realization that our own academic credibility is perhaps less aesthetically precarious as we age. Yet we find it difficult to escape the need to perform under the gaze of the Academy, a gaze that has permeated our homes during the recent pandemic. Such issues are even more challenging for those not seen to comply with apparent gender norms, for example, as explored in the moving documentary *Disclosure* (2020). Recognizing the complexity of gendered identity and broader attention to intersectionality is an important future development for aesthetic labor research to address, ensuring we move beyond a concern with our female selves and highlight the issues faced by many others who do not perform gender in ways we have come to expect.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

#### ORCID

Katrina Pritchard  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1938-1272>

Rebecca Whiting  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4983-0972>

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Katrina Pritchard** is a Professor in the School of Management, Swansea University. Her research interests include identity (in a variety of employment/volunteering contexts) and diversity (with a specific focus on age and gender). Katrina is a qualitative researcher who embraces methodological diversity and innovation, exploring the use of creative, digital and visual methods in her research. She is active on Twitter via [@ProfKPritchard](https://twitter.com/ProfKPritchard)

**Rebecca Whiting** is a Reader in Organization Studies in the Department of Organizational Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research interests include socially constructed aspects of diversity (particularly age, gender and class), work-life boundaries, business and research ethics and the role of digital technology in the organization of contemporary work. She is a qualitative researcher and leads the Department's Qualitative Research Methods Group. Her research has used a variety of qualitative methodologies, including participatory video diaries, multimodal analysis of online data and discourse methods.

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