


PREMIUM

How well do you age?



Bone loss, facial tissues sagging and formation of jowls come with ageing as people lose facial fullness when fat pads shrink. PHOTOS: ISTOCKPHOTO, FACEAPP

With ageing filters all the rage, here is a look at why some people age better than others

Venessa Lee 

FaceApp, which uses ageing filters to predict how one might look in the future, may have raised privacy concerns, but some users are more alarmed about how old the app makes them look.

Recent allegations of data theft by the artificial intelligence that powers the app have overtaken the #faceappchallenge earlier this month, when thousands worldwide posted geriatric photos of themselves on social media.

The app, which is made by a Russian company, can also edit photos to show users younger versions of their faces.

One user, Mr Andrew Yeo, 41, says it was a shock to be presented with his grey-haired future self.

"It was very ugly. I had so many wrinkles," says the pastor, adding that confidentiality complaints are common, not only for FaceApp, but also for other online platforms.

"Maybe FaceApp isn't complimentary for Asians. My Caucasian friends looked nice on the app."

Fuller lips, chubby cheeks and high cheekbones would likely age better. The Asian face shape and the distribution and amount of fat contribute to a more youthful look.

DR LEE HANJING, plastic surgeon at National University Hospital's division of plastic, reconstructive and aesthetic surgery



Plastic surgeon Por Yong Chen, medical director of Dream Aesthetics and Plastic Surgery, says: "As Orientals, we don't age as much. Our dermis is thicker so we don't wrinkle as much as Caucasians, for instance. The thicker the dermis, the more collagen and elastic fibres available."



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While physicians and plastic surgeons interviewed by The Sunday Times were divided on the accuracy of FaceApp, which uses an algorithm to approximate ageing, the face-editing app raises the question of why some might age worse than others.

While acknowledging the multiple nationalities and races in the continent, doctors say that Asians generally age better than most others.

This is due to a combination of biological and cultural factors, ranging from skin type to face shape to beauty ideals that are widely held.

The dermis is a section of skin that lies below the epidermis, the outer layer of skin that protects it against the environment.

Collagen and elastin, proteins that can be found in the dermis, offer support and elasticity, and stave off fine lines and wrinkles. The body's ability to produce collagen reduces with age, contributing to wrinkles and skin dryness.

While ageing is a complex process - taking into account genetics, hormonal changes like menopause, and other individual factors - many aspects of growing old are universal.

Bone resorption, or bone loss, for instance, causes people's facial structure to look more hollow, especially in the cheeks and near the eyes. Facial tissues sag and jowls form because of this reduction in structural support. People lose facial fullness and volume as fat pads shrink.

Plumpness can be a good thing when it comes to ageing.

The look of youth is "volume and fullness", says Dr Lee Hanjing, a plastic surgeon at National University Hospital's division of plastic, reconstructive and aesthetic surgery.

"This is why fuller lips, chubby cheeks and high cheekbones would likely age better.

"The Asian face shape and the distribution and amount of fat contribute to a more youthful look."

For example, Asian faces tend to have a more "bony prominence in the maxilla bone, which is the centre part of the cheek next to the nose. Overlying that region, the amount of fat that we have is also more, compared with Caucasians".

The amount of the pigment melanin in Asian skin provides better protection against sun damage, a major factor in ageing.

Dr Lynn Chiam, a dermatologist at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital, says: "Increased melanin is advantageous in delaying the onset of photo-ageing."

She points out that even fairer-skinned Asians are considered to have more melanin compared with blond, blue-eyed Scandinavians who burn easily in the sun, according to the Fitzpatrick skin type system, which categorises six skin types and their associated hair and eye colour, based on how much they burn or tan in the sun.

Skin with very little melanin is likely to burn in the sun, while skin high in melanin tans more than it burns. Dark skin has the most protection against photo-ageing.



Actor Allan Wu used FaceApp to age himself in a photo. PHOTO: WULANDER/INSTAGRAM

An "obsession with protection against the sun" and aspirational standards of fair skin among many Asians lead to better sun protection or avoidance, which is anti-ageing, says Dr Kevin Chua, a physician at Drs Chua and Partners, who has an interest in aesthetics.

While Asian skin affords a certain protection against rapid ageing, its propensity for pigmentation issues, compared with other ethnicities, is one reason FaceApp is not entirely accurate, according to NUH's Dr Lee.

"Ageing is a process that will cause certain predictable features to develop, thus FaceApp can, to a certain degree, place features like wrinkles at specific locations to simulate the appearance of ageing. This is similar to make-up that make-up artists use to create an aged appearance in actors," says Dr Lee.

"But some aspects of ageing will not be accurately depicted by FaceApp, such as the nature and location of pigmentary changes, coarseness of skin and the degree of sagging."

Ageing is "multi-factorial", says plastic surgeon Woffles Wu.

"You cannot generalise it. An app doesn't take into account factors like sickness or weight gain or loss."



Singer-songwriter Inch Chua used FaceApp to age herself in a photo. PHOTO: THISISINCH/INSTAGRAM

The good news is that lifestyle and other practices that affect ageing are under one's control.

Dr Chiam Chiak Teng, resident physician at Ensoul Medical Clinic, which provides aesthetic and anti-ageing treatments, says that getting enough sleep, eating a nutritious diet, managing stress well, skincare and beauty treatments, and not smoking, all play a role in ageing well.

"If you're in general good health, you tend to age better," he says.

"We can't stop the process of ageing completely, but we can slow down the process."