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Senior, mature or single: A qualitative analysis of homepage advertisements of dating sites for older adults



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ABSTRACT

In light of the growing importance of online dating sites for older adults and their potential for increased social support and leisure activities, the present study assessed the verbal contents of homepage advertisements of online dating sites. We identified dating sites for older adults through the Google web-search engine, during May 2016. All verbal information available on the homepage of the sites was used for analysis purposes. Qualitative content analysis was conducted, using open coding, followed by grouping of codes into major themes. A first theme, named, “*how are older adults described?*” addressed the advertised characteristics of the target population. Older adults, were portrayed in positive-neutral terms vs. negative terms. A second theme, named, “*what do older adults want?*” described the main purpose of each site as promoting long-term relationship or even marriage vs. companionship or flirting. Ambivalence about old age is evident in the ways older adults and dating sites are advertised.

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1. Introduction

The internet has become a popular venue for enhancing one's social network, with online dating sites turning ever more popular in the past two decades (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). Despite a general notion that older adults are not technologically savvy and as a result, might face multiple barriers in accessing the internet (Gatto & Tak, 2008), research has shown that over half of Americans age 65 and older use emails and the internet (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012).

With increasing age, some older adults may face a dwindling social network as a result of retirement and the death and sickness of partners, friends and family members (Wrzus, Hänel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013). Reduced physical ability and mobility might make the internet a particularly valuable way for developing and maintaining social networks (Cotten, Anderson, & McCullough, 2013). In support of this claim, research (Nimrod, 2011) has argued for the beneficial effects of senior online communities. Senior online communities are thought to provide older adults with meaningful opportunities to maintain, enhance and demonstrate their abilities (Nimrod, 2011). Online communities also provide opportunities to

obtain social support and growth and even enhance older adults' mental health (Nimrod, 2010).

Despite the documented potential benefits of the internet to older adults, research on non-dating online sites for older adults (Levy, Chung, Bedford, & Navrazhina, 2014) has shown that even sites on Facebook that specifically focus on older adults tend to be quite ageist. It was concluded that instead of empowering older adults, these sites advocate for the exclusion of older adults from society (Levy et al., 2014). The negative portrayal of older adults on Facebook is consistent with ageist messages found in traditional media, such as newspapers or television programs (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000; Kay & Furnham, 2013). For instance, older adults are often ignored all together and regarded as an invisible sector of the population. Other times, older adults are presented as caricatures or sources of ridicule. Moreover, older adults tend to feature only in advertisements that specifically target older adults, rather than in advertisements for the general population (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000; Kay & Furnham, 2013). Similar findings were reported with regard to the new media, which tends to criticize, infantilize and advocate for the exclusion of older adults (Levy et al., 2014).

Past research has pointed out to prominent intersections between ageism and sexism in the media (Calasanti, 2007) as well as in other settings (McGann et al., 2016). Although both men and

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women are negatively affected by ageism (Allan, Johnson, & Emerson, 2014), there has been a greater emphasis on attractiveness, health and fitness as sources of women's power. These qualities tend to deteriorate as people age (Chrisler, Rossini, & Newton, 2015). Hence, as women age, they tend to be negatively stereotyped and become invisible (Clarke & Griffin, 2008), but men oftentimes, are depicted positively even as they age (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012; Vernon, Williams Jr, Phillips, & Wilson, 1991). From early on, women invest in their physical appearance (Tiggemann, 2004). Yet, dissatisfaction with their appearance seems to be prevalent among women of all age groups, with the exception of women of very old age, who tend to be less concerned about their physical appearance and more concerned about their functioning (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011). Men on the other hand, appear to be less concerned or dissatisfied with their physical appearance throughout the adult life course (Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012; Spedale, Coupland, & Tempest, 2014).

These well-documented gender differences in attitudes towards one's aging appearance were attributed to the evolutionary role of youth among women, who have a limited child-bearing period (Archer, 1996). Men, on the other hand, take the role of providers and as such, their financial status and professional success are seen as more important than their youth. Moreover, in contrast to women, men's fertility does not diminish completely as they age. Hence, their advanced age does not necessarily reduce their attractiveness (Wiederman & Allgeier, 1992).

These arguments (Archer, 1996 (Wiederman & Allgeier, 1992);) are consistent with research on dating sites for older adults. Research (Burrows, 2013; Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014) has repeatedly shown that men are more likely to present status symbols, including their property, financial success or professional status, whereas women are more likely to emphasize their attractive physical appearance. A different research has found gender differences in the preferences of older adults: although both older men and older women attempt to present a youthful appearance and to seek out youthful partners, older men are more likely to look for commitment in relations, whereas older women tend to seek companionship, rather than intimacy (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014). These findings clearly suggest that gender and not only age should be taken into account in order to better contextualize the portrayal of older adults by online dating sites.

Despite the growing popularity of online dating sites for older adults (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009), to the best of our knowledge, there has been no research on the contents used for advertising purposes by these sites. Advertising for older adults should take into account the unique characteristics, needs and preferences of older adults (Zhang et al., 2006). This is because older adults are known to have somewhat different re-partnering styles compared with younger adults (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Benson & Coleman, 2016). Specifically, fears of future health decline and the need to provide caregiving services to one's partner or to share the inheritance with step-children, rather than directly transfer to biological children, tend to hinder older adults from formally establishing their partnership (Funk & Kobayashi, 2014).

These findings have been supported by research on online daters that found age differences in mate preferences; researchers have noted that older adults are more likely to mention health or asexual relationship as motivations for the relationship (Coupland, 2000). This is contrasted with younger adults, who mention motivations, such as seeking one's soulmate, adventure or romance (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2013). In addition, compared with younger adults, older adults were more likely to be highly selective in their mate preferences and to be willing to travel a great distance in order to meet these preferences (McIntosh, Locker, Briley, Ryan, & Scott, 2011). A contemporary study has shown that older adults

are more likely to use first person plural pronouns, and talk about health and positive emotions, whereas younger adults are more likely to use singular pronouns and explicitly talk about their career achievements (Davis & Fingerman, 2016).

1.1. The present study

The main research question proposed by this study concerned the portrayal of older adults by online dating sites that specifically target older adults. The present study aimed to assess the verbal contents delivered by online dating sites. Theoretically, we draw from research on the role of language as shaping social structures and power relations in society (Reid & Ng, 1999). This has long been recognized by the feminist literature in the early 70's (Lakoff, 1973). As a result of this understanding, there have been attempts to use a more gender neutral language. However, these attempts too, have been criticized as offending readers of both sexes due to their stereotypical nature (Bales, 2002). Research in the field of ageism still lags behind research on sexism (Nelson, 2004). Hence, the concepts of age neutral language vs. ageist language (e.g., use of the term older adults vs. the elderly, respectively) has received acknowledgement decades later (Gendron, Welleford, Inker, & White, 2016). Moreover, it has been argued that even gerontologists, who study old age, perpetuate the negative image of older adults through the use of language which equates aging with frailty and portrays the aging demographics as a societal challenge (Palmore, 2000; Schaie, 1993).

A better assessment of the contents presented by online dating sites is important given past research (Levy, 2009) which has shown that older adults tend to internalize age stereotypes portrayed by society. In light of the growing importance of online dating sites for older adults and the high potential for increased social support and leisure activities promoted by online sites (Nimrod, 2011), it is essential to better assess the contents conveyed by these sites. These sites can be seen as producing the image of older adults and dating in old age in society and as reflecting current societal views (Bruner, 1991; Gendron et al., 2016). Either way, online dating sites likely capture a growing place in the lives of older daters and as such, the messages portrayed by these sites should be assessed. Moreover, we know that once negative age stereotypes are internalized, they have deleterious health and wellbeing effects (Avidor, Ayalon, Palgi, & Bodner, 2016; Ayalon, 2016; Hausdorff, Levy, & Wei, 1999). Hence, a critical evaluation of the verbal contents presented by online dating sites can potentially assist in better tailoring the contents conveyed by these sites.

2. Methods

The present study is a qualitative study designed to evaluate the verbal portrayal of older adults by online dating sites for older adults. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the authors' university. We identified dating sites for older adults through the Google web-search engine during May 2016. The search included the following key words: *Dating site/s, Older adults/people, Mature, Senior/s*. Sites that targeted older adults for online dating were included in the final list. Sites were not excluded based on the country or region they operated in. In fact, sites that had distinctive homepages in different countries were reviewed separately. Sites that did not communicate in English were excluded. The search concluded when duplicate online dating sites appeared. We also reviewed six articles that recommended online dating sites for older adults. These articles were obtained by the Google web-search, under the key-terms "What are the best online dating sites for older adults/mature/seniors" and "recommended online dating

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