



Constructions of sexuality in later life: Analyses of Canadian magazine and newspaper portrayals of online dating

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements as well as contemporary literature and films often depict older adults as sexually undesirable and unattractive, which reinforces the stereotype that they are nonsexual. However, the evolving discourses of successful aging emphasize that active engagement in life is a key element of healthy aging and as such, have been influencing the ways that older adults' sexuality is represented. This paper explores how popular newspapers and magazines in Canada construct and portray later life sexuality within the context of online dating. We retrieved 144 newspaper and magazine articles about later life online dating that were published between 2009 and 2011. Our thematic and discursive analyses of the articles generated six themes. Of 144 articles, 13% *idealized sexuality* (sexual attractiveness and optimal sexual engagement) for older adults. The articles portrayed *sexual interests and functioning as declining* in later life (19%) more often than *sustaining* (15%). Approximately 15% of the articles suggested that older adults should explore new techniques to boost sexual pleasure, thereby *medicalizing and ameliorating sexual decline*. In addition, the articles *challenged the stereotype of older adults as non-sexual* and claimed that *sexual engagement in later life was valuable* as it contributed to successful aging. We address the paradox in the articles' positive portrayals of older adults' sexuality and the tensions that arise between the two distinct ideals of sexuality that they advance.

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Although magazine and newspaper advertisements, TV commercials, films and contemporary literature have generally depicted older adults as non-sexual or post-sexual, representations of sexuality in later life are changing in response to shifting perceptions of what it means to age well. This paper explores how emerging social norms pertaining to aging sexuality are reflected in Canadian newspaper and magazine article depictions of online dating. It is salient to note that sexuality remains elusive as a concept and operational definitions often focus on “(hetero) sexual intercourse” in research (Gott, 2005, p. 12). We employ a broad conceptualization of sexuality in this study that

includes “sexual behavior, sensual activity, emotional intimacy, or sense of sexual identity” (Hillman, 2000, p. 5) to ensure that the study fully captured all dimensions of our subject.

Background

Sexuality in later life

Sexuality in later life has long been a contested cultural topic as older adults have often been stereotyped as both asexual and unattractive (Byers, 1983; González, 2007; Gott, 2005). However, the emergence of anti-aging culture (Katz, 2001) and increased societal focus on aging optimally has led to the reconstruction of older adults' sexuality. In particular, sexual performance and engagement have come to be seen as markers of success or failure at aging well (Gott, 2005; Katz, 2001; Katz & Marshall, 2003) and a means of defying the negative stereotypes

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associated with later life (Marshall, 2011). Consequently, there has been growing interest in pharmaceutical interventions (e.g., Viagra and Cialis) that enable older adults to restore or ameliorate their sexual functioning (Katz & Marshall, 2004; Scherrer, 2009) as aging is positioned as a pathological rather than natural process (González, 2007; Katz & Marshall, 2003; Kaufman, Shim, & Russ, 2004) and those who experience sexual decline are seen to not be aging successfully (Katz & Marshall, 2003).

Media portrayals of later life sexuality

The media not only reflect social and cultural assumptions about a phenomenon but also inform people about the ways in which issues are viewed or should be viewed (Gornick, 1979). A wealth of research has examined how various media, including advertising, films, print media, and television portray older adults and reinforce cultural assumptions about later life (see for example, Carrigan & Szmigin, 1998; Lumme-Sandt, 2011; Powell, 2013; Zhang et al., 2006). While older adults continue to be underrepresented in magazine and newspaper advertising and television commercials (Carrigan & Szmigin, 1998; Zhang et al., 2006), collectively the various media entrench youth-based, heteronormative standards of sexuality (de Luce, 2001; Lewis, Medvedev, & Seponski, 2011). Print media, television advertisements, contemporary romance novels, and films primarily feature thin, physically attractive, able-bodied, young women who are held up as the epitome of feminine beauty and sexual desirability (de Luce, 2001; Lewis et al., 2011; Ménard & Cabrera, 2011).

At the same time, the media also reproduce gendered disparities as older men tend to be depicted more positively than older women. For example, older men's experiences as well as the economic, social, and political power that they wield are portrayed as key features of an idealized masculinity in advertising and magazine articles (Calasanti & King, 2005; Hurd Clarke, Bennett, & Liu, 2014). Thus, representations of older men are associated with power and authority as "a-aged" or vintage (Hearn, 1995, p. 107). In contrast, the aging female body tends to be hypervisible and depicted as a "needy consumer body" (Woodward, 2006, p. 183) as visible signs of aging (e.g., wrinkles and sagging) are increasingly considered deviant, ugly, and unhealthy (Calasanti, 2007; Hurd Clarke, 2010). Youthfulness and beauty have been predominantly highlighted as key indicators of women's sexuality in different media (Ménard & Cabrera, 2011). That said, the existing research also reveals that even as some newspapers advocate women's sexual autonomy and freedom (Inglis & MacKeogh, 2012), magazines generally present women as submissive and sexually available to men (Clarke, 2009; Krassas, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2001). Such images reflect what is called the "male gaze" of women's sexuality and attractiveness, which sexually objectifies women (Krassas et al., 2001, p. 752) and reinforces the hegemonic, heteronormative standard of women's sexuality (Clarke, 2009).

In addition to studies focused on the messages constructed by and embodied in the various media, there has been research done on the influence of the media on individuals' perceptions and experiences. The extant research reveals that extended exposure to media messages concerning ideal male and female bodies often leads to body image dissatisfaction, particularly

among younger adults (Cusumano & Thompson, 2001; Fernandez & Pritchard, 2012; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005). On the other hand, some people resist overly sensational stories that they perceive to have been written with the intention of causing readers to panic and refuse to assume positions that have been dictated by the media (Holland & Blood, 2013; van Zoonen, 2007). This ability to critically evaluate roles that are idealized by the media and may be inappropriate or unrealistic is enhanced by media education and literacy (Pinkleton, Austin, Chen, & Cohen, 2012; Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel, 2001; Yamamiya et al., 2005).

Online dating in later life

There is a growing body of literature exploring online dating as individuals increasingly turn to the Internet and social media as a means of connecting with others and finding potential mates. Smith and Duggan (2013) found that 20% of individuals who were 65+ knew someone who had formed a serious relationship with a person he or she had met online—this percentage had tripled since 2005. Stephure, Boon, MacKinnon, and Deveau (2009) claimed that older adults are actually more likely than younger adults to seek marital and intimate partners online and more serious about the pursuit of intimate relationships than younger adults. In contrast, a study conducted by Smith and Duggan (2013) found that only 3% of American adults over the age of 65 had participated in online dating, compared with 17% and 15% of individuals aged 25–34 and 35–44, respectively. One of the reasons for this low engagement might be that older adults find it challenging to create online profiles that present their age and sexuality in a positive manner (e.g., McWilliams & Barrett, 2014).

Individuals who engage in online dating are aware that creating a profile that is seen as attractive as well as genuine is critical to attaining a desirable date (Whitty, 2007, 2008; Whitty & Carr, 2006). That said, attractiveness is gendered as different qualities are esteemed in men and women. Male sexual attractiveness is equated with socio-economic status and occupational success (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; McWilliams & Barrett, 2014). In contrast, physical appearance and youthfulness are prized in women (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; McWilliams & Barrett, 2014; Whitty, 2008), which creates particular challenges for older women who must carefully negotiate how they present themselves in their profiles in order to successfully attract men (Frohlick & Migliardi, 2011; McWilliams & Barrett, 2014; Whitty, 2008). As a result, some older women actively deceive men about their chronological ages (Coupland, 2000).

Theorizing later life sexuality

Contemporary discourses of successful aging maintain that older individuals are responsible for managing the aging process well (Katz & Marshall, 2003; Laliberte Rudman, 2006). Older adults are increasingly aware of the key components that are seen to characterize healthy, successful aging, such as active engagement in life and a positive attitude (Reichstadt, Depp, Palinkas, Folsom, & Jeste, 2007; Reichstadt, Sengupta, Depp, Palinkas, & Jeste, 2010). In addition, the conceptualization of the Third Age—a rich and meaningful post-employment life—encourages retired older adults to engage in meaningful

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