



## Cougars on the prowl? New perceptions of older women's sexuality



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### ABSTRACT

Images of women's sexuality beyond the age of forty are lacking in popular culture. Recently, however, the term cougar has been embraced by American media as a label describing "older" women who assertively pursue younger sexual partners. This term and women's opinions of it can be viewed as exemplary of two competing ideologies about aging and sexuality. These are: 1) recognition of older women's sexual desire, consistent with new trends that promote lifelong sexual health and sexual activity; or, 2) linking aging and asexuality, when the term cougar is used as a pejorative that reinforces age and gender stereotypes. Based on in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of 84 women in their 20s–60s, we explore reactions to this term and its implications for women's aging and sexuality. We find that the majority of women viewed the label cougar negatively, or had mixed feelings about what it suggests regarding older women's sexuality, particularly as it marked women as predators or aggressors. Some women, however, embraced the term or its meaning, as indicative of the reality of older women's sexuality and continued sexual desire.

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### Introduction

*It's dangerous business tracking a cougar—a sophisticated species of female who seeks the pleasure of younger males. These are 40-ish women who have no qualms about picking up—or getting picked up by—the same boys they sent off to bed for being naughty when they were babysitters. Men their own age? They've been there, done that, and collected the alimony.... [In New York City clubs] you can see cougars in their natural habitat—strappy heels, cleavage, a little too much makeup and a glint in their eye.*

[(New York Post, Kane, 2006)]

In the past decade, the term cougar has become a popular descriptor of older, unmarried women who express their sexuality by publicly pursuing younger men for casual

relationships or sexual encounters. This term is unique in its acknowledgment of sexual desire among older women. Although cougar is often used as a pejorative or caricature of a desperate divorcee, it recognizes the fact that women can continue to have sex lives beyond the age of forty. This is a new way of viewing older women, who have generally been perceived as disinterested in sex or as undesirable and unattractive sexual partners.

As a common descriptor for sexually aggressive older women, the term cougar is relatively new. According to lexicographer Barrett (2007), it appears that the term first became popular in North America after the 2001 publication of a self-help type book by Valerie Gibson entitled *Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men*. However, Barrett traces the word's origin to 1999 when a dating website designed to match older women and younger men was founded, as was later documented in a 2001 article in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*. He noted that, "the story ... is that one of the two women who founded the website was told by a nephew that the two ladies were like cougars in search of small defenseless animals." A search of major American

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newspapers shows that the first time the word cougar was used in print in such a capacity was in 2006, in an article in the *New York Post* called, “Cougar hunting—Prowl into NYC’s hottest scene: Older women, young guys” (Kane, 2006). Later that same year, an American film called *The Cougar Club*, about older women who pursued sexual relationships with younger men, was released. It was not again until 2008 that the word cougar was used in a major U.S. newspaper, when it was the subject of eight articles, and then it appeared in twelve articles in 2009, fourteen in 2010, and eleven in 2011. This is evidence of the increasing commonality and popular use of the term.

Furthermore, in 2009 both an American reality television dating series, “The Cougar,” and a situation comedy, “Cougar Town,” began to air. And, in 2012, there were numerous online dating services that focused specifically on pairing older women with younger men, such as “dateacougar.com,” “cougarlife.com,” “maturekiss.com,” and “datemrsrobinson.com.” Cougars have become ubiquitous representations of older women’s sexuality; yet, attitudes about them have not been explored. In this paper, we examine attitudes about the term cougar and the behavior associated with this identity as a way of understanding ideologies about women’s sexuality and aging. As there are no other similar identifiable tropes or images of a libidinous older woman, we find analysis of this word to be especially useful as an example of deviation from traditional/dominant sexual scripts both in terms of age and gender.

It is important to study the ways in which ideologies about women, aging, and sexuality are constructed and negotiated, particularly those which differ from dominant understandings of sexual expression because behavior is influenced by culture. Norms for age-appropriate sexual expression influence interpersonal behavior and social interaction and may create self-fulfilling prophecies (Kuypers & Bengtson, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1984). When people view older women as asexual, women may feel less sexual or believe they should be disinterested in sex. This may present problems as research suggests that a decrease in sexuality dampens the enjoyment of later life (Katz & Marshall, 2003), and desire helps older people maintain a sense of cultural engagement and personal satisfaction (Dowd, 2012).

Thus, analysis of attitudes regarding the term cougar illuminates contemporary mores of sexual display for older women and provides insight on how women who show their sexuality in an assertive or obvious manner are regarded by their peers and women more generally. We look at the term cougar as demonstrative of competing ideologies about aging and sexuality. These are: 1) the dominant discourse which links aging and asexuality, found within the health and gerontology literature, as well as in some sociological studies of sexuality; and 2) an alternate discourse which recognizes older women’s sexual desire, as noted in qualitative investigations of older women’s sexuality.

### The study of “older” women’s sexuality

Women’s sexuality during mid-life, between the ages of thirty and sixty, has largely been neglected in research. Several recent survey-based studies (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2006; Koch, Mansfield, Thurau, & Carey, 2005; Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2009; Waite, Laumann, Das, & Schumm,

2009) have been notable exceptions to this dearth of literature and examine how private sexuality, primarily defined as sexual activity and satisfaction, changes for women as they age and experience the middle years (see Edwards & Booth, 1994; Levy, 1994, for reviews of older studies concerning age, sexual activity, and sexual satisfaction). When women reach an age where they are presumed to have difficulties or are expected to lose interest in sex, it is almost as if sexuality is erased from their identities (Gullette, 1997). And, research suggests that gynecologists often fail to ask older women about sexual activity because they assume these women are not sexually active (Langer-Most & Langer, 2010). This is due to stereotypes of older women as asexual or undesirable (Carpenter et al., 2006; Gullette, 1997; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013a; Tally, 2006; Twigg, 2007) or stereotypes reinforcing the notion that sexual dysfunction during and post-menopause leaves older women disinterested in sex (Katz & Marshall, 2003; Vares, Potts, Gavey, Grace, & V., 2007).

The dominant sexual script for women over forty has been the frigid older woman. However, an asexual mid-life or old age is far from reality for all women. Although sexual activity wanes with age, many women remain interested in sex and sexually active throughout their lives (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003; Loe, 2004; Montemurro, in press; Waite, 2010; Waite et al., 2009). For example, a couple of studies found significant numbers of women whose sexual response and desire were unchanged by age (Koch et al., 2005; Vares et al., 2007). And a growing body of literature investigating the sexual activity of post-menopausal women finds that while frequency of sexual intercourse usually declines with age, there are significant numbers of women in their 60s, 70s, 80s, and even 90s who remain sexually active and consider sex important to them and, often, their relationships (e.g., Gott & Hinchliff, 2003; Hinchliff & Gott, 2004; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Katz & Marshall, 2003; Levy, 1994; Loe, 2004; Sharpe, 2006; Waite, 2010; Waite et al., 2009).

Women’s experiences with sexuality and aging are far from uniform. The social and physical realities of aging affect women in different ways, depending on factors like generation, relationship status, sexual orientation, cultural norms, health, or partners’ health (Waite, 2010; Waite et al., 2009). For instance, Waite et al. (2009) found that approximately sixty-three percent of women between the ages of fifty-seven and seventy-four cited partner’s health problems as explanation for sexual inactivity. Such older women’s increased sexual disinterest is explained, in large part, by their greater likelihood of not having a sexual partner or a partner able to have intercourse. Furthermore, some of this research demonstrates how women accept a decrease in sexual activity as a “natural” progression in life, rather than viewing it, as the medical community has, as a sign of decline (Dillaway, 2005; Gott, 2005; Marshall & Katz, 2002). Studies such as these point to the importance of re-conceptualizing sexuality and sex for older people, moving beyond narrow, heteronormative constructions which privilege intercourse as defining sexual activity (Gott, 2005; Marshall & Katz, 2002).

Most of these studies focus on private sexuality—that is what men or women do with their partners behind closed doors, rather than exploring public images and expressions of sexuality as people age. We know very little about how older people show their sexuality, feel about sexual displays (see

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