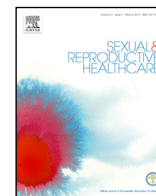




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## “Forty is the new twenty”: An analysis of British media portrayals of older mothers

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 29 April 2014

Revised 14 October 2014

Accepted 27 October 2014

## Keywords:

Advanced maternal age

Pregnancy risks

Media representations

UK

## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Despite increased risks of infertility and poor outcomes, women in high-income countries are increasingly deferring pregnancy beyond age 35. The underlying causes are incompletely understood. The mass media is recognised as a powerful influence on health-related behaviour; therefore media representations warrant critical examination.

**Study design:** Qualitative thematic analysis of portrayals of pregnancy and birth in women over 35 in UK national newspapers, popular magazines and television programmes

**Results:** Extensive media interest in childbearing and a preponderance of coverage related to celebrities was confirmed. Three main themes were identified; delayed childbearing was portrayed positively, as part of a life plan allowing women have the “best of both worlds”. The media did not acknowledge age per se as an obstacle to pregnancy and endorsed reproductive technologies suggesting ‘it’s never too late’. Images and descriptions of ideal post-pregnancy bodies in women over 35 reinforced the message that “you can regain your beautiful body”.

**Conclusion:** Delayed childbearing was represented positively, as it facilitated conformity with dominant ideologies surrounding motherhood. Within these boundaries, the effects of age were disregarded. This study provides evidence of restrictive framing of the issues surrounding delayed childbearing in the UK media which militate against communication of important public health messages.

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## Introduction

The mean age for giving birth in the UK increased from 28.5 years in 2000 to 29.8 years in 2012. Whilst overall fertility declined slightly over the same period, fertility rates amongst women aged 35–39 years and 40 plus increased by 1% and 2.4%, respectively. Births to women over 40 have quadrupled over the last 30 years, from 6519 in 1982 to 29994 in 2012 in 2010 [1]. This accelerating demographic shift appears to be a worldwide phenomenon in developed countries; births to US women aged 40–44 almost doubled since 1990 [2]. The fertility rate for Australian women over 35 has exceeded that of women aged 20–24 since 2003 [3].

The trend towards delayed motherhood has become a significant public health issue because of the negative impacts of advancing

maternal age on reproductive outcomes. Epidemiological studies consistently report an association between advancing maternal age infertility and miscarriage [4,5]. This increases demand for assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) which are less successful in older women [6]. Women deferring pregnancy face a real prospect of involuntary childlessness, in addition to increased risk of adverse maternal and perinatal outcomes, notably stillbirth [4,7]. These concerns prompted the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to issue advice encouraging women to “consider having families during the period of optimal fertility (age 20–35)” [8].

The causes underlying the rise in advanced maternal age are incompletely understood; shifting gender roles and the achievement of educational and career goals are repeatedly cited in the literature [9,10]. However, a recent metasynthesis of the qualitative literature identified a complex interplay of personal, social, economic and cultural factors constraining earlier childbearing [11]. Cooke et al. also identified lack of knowledge regarding the success rates of fertility treatments and the increased risks in pregnancy. Some women suggested they might have had children sooner had they been better informed.

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The mass media is recognised to be a powerful force in shaping health beliefs and behaviours and contributes to defining “normal” and “reasonable” conduct in health-related issues [12]. Therefore, media portrayals of older mothers are likely to influence public perceptions of the acceptability of delayed childbearing. The media has been accused of promoting an idealised view of motherhood, embracing traditional notions of the appropriate age, marital/relationship status and financial stability which define a “good mother”. Women becoming mothers outside these boundaries; teenagers, unsupported women and lesbians often receive disproportionate media attention because they are perceived as “bad mothers” [13]. There have been few studies examining representations of older mothers in the UK media. Shaw and Giles identified negative bias in a small sample of print and online news reports responding to a conference report on maternal physical and mental health following birth over 50 [14]. However, examination of a wider sample of sources is required to determine the extent of media influence on public perceptions of delayed childbearing. Therefore we conducted an analysis of the representation of maternal age in relation to pregnancy in newspapers, women’s magazines and a selection of TV programmes.

## Methods

This was a qualitative, exploratory analysis of media representations of maternal age and older mothers in UK print and broadcast media sources.

### Sample

A range of UK sources reflecting the popular news and current affairs, lifestyle, entertainment and specialist pregnancy and parenting media published or broadcast during November 2009 were included:

**Newspapers:** All English national daily and Sunday newspapers (excluding the Financial Times which has an economics/business focus; Table 1). These are accessed in print or online by 81.7% of UK adults 15 + [National Readership Survey[NRS] 2014] (<http://www.nrs.co.uk>).

**Magazines:** The top 10 highest circulation (excluding subscription only) women’s weekly and monthly general interest magazines (selected via Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) data

**Table 1**  
Media sources by type and date<sup>a</sup>.

Newspapers			
Tabloid	Issue date	Broadsheet	Issue date
<i>Daily Express</i> (Mon–Sat)	2–7, 9–14, 16–21, 23–28, 30	<i>The Guardian</i> (Mon–Sat)	2–7, 9–14, 16–21, 23–28, 30
<i>Daily Mail</i> (Mon–Sat)		<i>The Independent</i> (Mon–Sat)	1, 8, 15, 22, 29
<i>Daily Mirror</i> (Mon–Sat)		<i>The Telegraph</i> (Mon–Sat)	
<i>The Star</i> (Mon–Sat)		<i>The Times</i> (Mon–Sat)	
<i>The Sun</i> (Mon–Sat)			
<i>Sunday Express</i> (Sunday)	1, 8, 15, 22, 29	<i>Independent on Sunday</i> (Sunday)	
<i>Mail on Sunday</i> (Sunday)		<i>The Observer</i> (Sunday)	
<i>Sunday Mirror</i> (Sunday)		<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> (Sunday)	
<i>The People</i> (Sunday)		<i>The Sunday Times</i> (Sunday)	
<i>The News of the World</i> (Sunday)			
Magazines			
Women’s general interest		Pregnancy and parenting	
Weekly	Issue date	Monthly	Monthly
<i>Best</i>	3, 10, 17, 24	<i>Company</i>	<i>I’m Pregnant</i>
<i>Chat</i>	5, 12, 19, 26	<i>Cosmopolitan</i>	<i>Mother and Baby</i>
<i>Closer</i>	7, 14, 21, 28	<i>Glamour</i>	<i>Parenting</i>
<i>Heat</i>	7, 14, 21, 28	<i>Good Housekeeping</i>	<i>Prima: Mother and Baby</i>
<i>Hello</i>	9, 16, 23, 30	<i>Marie Claire</i>	
<i>OK</i>	3, 10, 17, 24	<i>She</i>	
<i>Now</i>	9, 16, 23, 30	<i>Top Santé</i>	
<i>Take a Break</i>	5, 12, 19, 26	<i>Vogue</i>	
<i>That’s Life</i>	5, 12, 19, 26	<i>Woman and Home</i>	
<i>Woman’s weekly</i>	3, 10, 17, 24	<i>Zest</i>	
TV Programmes			
Type	Name/channel	Episode date	
News	BBC 10 p.m. News (Mon–Fri)	2–6, 9–13, 16–20, 23–27, 30	
Drama	Eastenders (BBC1)	2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24, 26, 27	
	Coronation St (ITV1)	2 (2), 5, 6(2), 9(2), 11, 12, 13(2), 16(2), 19, 20(2), 23(2), 26, 27(2), 30	
	Emmerdale (ITV1)	2–4, 5(2), 6, 9–11, 12(2), 13, 16–18, 19(2), 20, 23–25, 26(2), 27, 30	
	Casualty (BBC1)	7, 14, 21, 28	
	Holby City (BBC1)	3, 10, 17, 24	
Special interest	Baby Tales (Discovery Home & Health [DHH])	4, 5, 6, 7(3), 8(2), 9(2), 10	
	Home Birth Diaries(DHH)	4, 5(2), 6, 7, 8	
	New Parent Nightmares (Sky Real 2)	6	
	Test Tube Babies(DHH)	5, 6(2), 7, 8(2)	
	Portland Babies(DHH)	7, 8, 9	
	Baby’s Room(DHH)	4, 5, 7, 8, 9	
	Deliver Me(DHH)	4, 5	
	Born Too Soon (ITV 1)	9	

<sup>a</sup> All published/broadcast in November 2009.

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