



# Aging and masculinity: Portrayals in men's magazines

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## ABSTRACT

Textual and visual representations of age are instructive as they suggest ideals towards which individuals should strive and influence how we perceive age. The purpose of our study was to investigate textual and visual representations of later life in the advertisements and interest stories of six widely read North American male-oriented magazines (namely, *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Maxim*, *Men's Health*, *Men's Journal*, and *Zoomer*). Through a content analysis and a visual textual analysis, we examined how older men were depicted in the magazine images and accompanying texts. Our findings revealed that older men were largely absent, and when portrayed, were positively depicted as experienced and powerful celebrities or as healthy and happy unknown individuals. The magazine advertisements and interest stories collectively required individuals to engage in consumer culture in order to achieve age and masculinity ideals and stave off the transition from the Third Age to the Fourth Age. We consider our findings in relation to theorizing about ageism, age relations, the Third and Fourth Ages, and idealized aging masculinity.

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## Introduction

Bytheway (2011) has argued that textual and visual representations of later life “create expectations of what it is to be a person of a particular age” (p. 80) and thereby “direct the way we see age” (p. 86). Reflecting deeply and strategically embedded cultural ideologies about aging, gender, and the body (Leiss, Kline, Jhally, & Botterill, 2005), representations of age are instructive as they suggest ideals towards which individuals are expected to strive. For example, the words and images found in magazine advertisements and interest stories collectively specify how individuals should engage with consumer culture in order to effectively perform dominant age and gender norms (Laz, 2003; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Identifying and promoting a myriad of products, services, and strategies, these representations of age further suggest avenues by which men may achieve age and masculinity ideals.

In this paper, we examine textual and visual representations of later life in six men's magazines, paying particular

attention to how aging masculinity is constructed in both advertisements and interest stories. We draw on theorizing about age relations (Calasanti, 2007; Calasanti & King, 2007) and the concepts of the Third and Fourth Age (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011; Higgs & McGowan, 2013; Laslett, 1996) to elucidate the messages entrenched in and reinforced by portrayals of men and aging.

## Literature review

### Ageism and age relations in the media

A term originally coined by Robert Butler in 1969, ageism entails stereotyping and discrimination against older adults (Butler, 1975). In particular, ageism “legitimizes the use of chronological age to mark out classes of people who are systematically denied resources and opportunities that others enjoy, and who suffer the consequences of such denigration, ranging from well-meaning patronage to unambiguous vilification” (Bytheway, 1995, p. 14). Ageism is reinforced by age relations whereby individuals who are not old accrue power and various social and economic assets at the expense of the old and deem their advantageous position to be rightful, “natural”

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and beyond dispute" (Calasanti, 2007, p. 336). Ageism is manifested in discriminatory policies and practices as well as deeply ingrained stereotypes that primarily depict later life as a time of poor health, dependency, senility, loss of sexual vigor, social isolation, sedentariness, and decreasing physical attractiveness (Butler, 1975; Nelson, 2002).

Ageism underpins and strengthens distinctions between optimal aging, or the Third Age, and failed aging, or the Fourth Age. A concept developed by Peter Laslett, the Third Age entails a retirement that is characterized by affluence, health, leisure, self-fulfillment, and social engagement (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; Laslett, 1996). As such, the Third Age is "an aging youth culture" (Higgs & McGowan, 2013, p. 22) in which its members have financial, physical, and social resources that enable them to be "older but not old" (Higgs & McGowan, 2013, p. 22) and to use consumption to "distance themselves from the collective plight of the fourth age" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, p. 45). In contrast, the Fourth Age is "an era of final dependence, decrepitude and death" (Laslett, 1996, p. 4) in which its members lose "choice, autonomy, self-expression, and pleasure" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010, p. 123). In this way, the Fourth Age is equivalent to the end-of-life, the cultural marginalization of old age, the antonym of Rowe and Kahn's conceptualization of successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1987, 1997), and the living embodiment of negative, ageist stereotypes.

The extant research has extensively examined the use of age stereotyping in magazine advertisements (Carrigan & Szmigin, 1998; Gantz, Gartenberg, & Rainbow, 1980; Harwood & Roy, 1999; Kvasnicka, Beymer, & Perloff, 1982; McConatha, Schnell, & McKenna, 1999; Peterson, 1992; Roberts & Zhou, 1997; Williams, Ylanne, Wadleigh, & Chen, 2010; Zhang et al., 2006; Zhou & Chen, 1992). This research suggests that both older men and women are underrepresented within advertisements and that when (rarely) portrayed, they are typically peripheral and grouped with others (Bramlett-Solomon & Wilson, 1989; Harwood & Roy, 1999; Low & Dupuis-Blanchard, 2013; Thompson, 1994). At the same time, there has been a marked shift over time in the way that older men in particular are depicted. Studies of advertisements prior to the 1990s tended to find that older men were not only invisible, but also represented as frail, weak, sick, and helpless (Gantz et al., 1980; Peterson, 1992; Zhou & Chen, 1992). One exception was a study conducted by Bramlett-Solomon and Wilson (1989), who found that while older men were associated with frailty and decline in advertisements for products such as ambulatory aids, dentures, insurance plans, or laxatives, they were equated with affluence and leisure in marketing campaigns for alcohol, cigarettes, food, recreational activities, travel, and vehicles. More recently, however, depictions of older men in magazine advertisements have become consistently positive (Carrigan & Szmigin, 1998; Lumme-Sandt, 2011; McConatha et al., 1999; Zhang et al., 2006). Thus, over the past two decades, older men have typically been portrayed as esteemed, happy, and affluent experts, grandparents, professionals, or active leisure participants (McConatha et al., 1999; Miller, Miller, McKibbin & Pettys, 1999; Roberts & Zhou, 1997; Williams et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2006).

#### *Aging masculinity in media portrayals*

In addition to studies focused on ageism in advertising, there is a growing body of literature that has explored how

advertisements portray idealized masculinity. These studies reveal that different magazines emphasize diverse aspects of idealized masculinity. For example, Ricciardelli, Chow, and White (2010) found that *FHM*, *Stuff*, and *Maxim* emphasized sexualized humor, sports, and violence, in contrast to *GQ*, *Details*, *Esquire*, and *OUT*, which relied upon designer fashion, material wealth, and status symbols in their portrayals of idealized manhood. Similarly, Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink (2003) have reported that the men portrayed in *Maxim* and *Stuff* were cast in roles such as business professionals and athletes that reinforced their heterosexuality. Alexander (2003) found that *Men's Health* instructed men to engage in diet and exercise in order to discipline their bodies and avoid "being seen as sissy, feminine, or anything less than a man" (p. 538). Finally, Boni's (2002) research revealed that *Men's Health* framed the male body as uncertain, at risk, and in need of protection "from illness, disease, and ultimately death" (p. 470).

While the bulk of the existing research on masculinity ideals in advertisements has ignored age, Calasanti and King (2005) have theorized that marketing campaigns for anti-aging products construct old masculinity in two distinct yet related ways, namely, "playing hard" (p. 10) and "staying hard" (p. 13). The former depiction "emphasizes activities modeled after the experiences of middle-aged, white, middle-class men" (p. 10) as older men "propel themselves into hard play as consumers of expensive sports and travel" (p. 10). In this way, advertisements construct idealized aging masculinity in relation to affluence, competition, health, and youthfulness. Similarly, the latter portrayal of aging masculinity is steeped in "Viagra culture" (Potts & Tiefer, 2006, p. 267) as older men are seen consuming products and services aimed at sustaining or rejuvenating their virility and sexual engagement, thereby enabling them to age successfully (Katz & Marshall, 2003).

To date, there has been no systematic investigation of how magazine advertisements construct and portray idealized aging masculinity, and those studies of advertisements that have focused solely on older men have attended only to ageist stereotyping. Lumme-Sandt (2011) has further noted that the research concerning media representations of aging has largely ignored media texts and images beyond advertisements. Addressing these gaps in the literature, our paper builds on the extant research and theorizing by critically investigating how older men and idealized aging masculinity are portrayed in magazine advertisements and interest stories.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample*

We selected the most widely read North American, male-oriented magazines (based on readership numbers provided in media packages; see Table 1) that did not specifically target young men, namely: *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Maxim*, *Men's Health*, and *Men's Journal*. We further included *Zoomer* magazine, which is marketed as "Canada's Boomer lifestyle magazine" (Zoomer, 2014), because it is the only Canadian magazine currently aimed specifically at older adults and thus provided a potential counterpoint to the other magazines. The data set included six issues of each magazine published between September 2012 and May 2013. Within the 36 magazine issues, we identified a total of 5305 images of men and women and their

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