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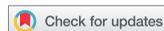
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Forever young: Visual representations of gender and age in online dating sites for older adults

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ABSTRACT

Online dating has become increasingly popular among older adults following broader social media adoption patterns. The current study examined the visual representations of people on 39 dating sites intended for the older population, with a particular focus on the visualization of the intersection between age and gender. All 39 dating sites for older adults were located through the Google search engine. Visual thematic analysis was performed with reference to general, non-age-related signs (e.g., facial expression, skin color), signs of aging (e.g., perceived age, wrinkles), relational features (e.g., proximity between individuals), and additional features such as number of people presented. The visual analysis in the present study revealed a clear intersection between ageism and sexism in the presentation of older adults. The majority of men and women were smiling and had a fair complexion, with light eye color and perceived age of younger than 60. Older women were presented as younger and wore more cosmetics as compared with older men. The present study stresses the social regulation of sexuality, as only heterosexual couples were presented. The narrow representation of older adults and the anti-aging messages portrayed in the pictures convey that love, intimacy, and sexual activity are for older adults who are “forever young.”

KEYWORDS

Ageism; older adults; online dating sites; sexism; visual representations

Introduction

Online dating refers to the practice of using dating sites to find a romantic partner. Dating sites operate by requesting users to compose self-descriptive profiles and then connecting them with databases of potential partners (Toma, 2016). Online dating has become increasingly popular among older adults, following broader social media patterns (AARP, 2012; Smith & Duggan, 2013). Yet, research on this phenomenon tends to focus on young to middle-aged adults (Henry-Waring, Barraket, & Sciences, 2008; Whitty, 2008), ignoring older adults, who are often stereotyped as lacking interest in intimate, particularly sexual relationships (Calasanti & Tech, 2007).

Smith and Duggan (2013) reported that 20% of those 65 and older know someone who has entered a serious relationship with someone they met via online dating (a threefold increase from the same data collected in 2005). An online dating survey among AARP (2012) members revealed 43% of older men (older than 50) and 57% of older women use online dating. The primary reason older adults report using online dating sites is to meet a broader range of people and to find a serious relationship (AARP, 2012). According to Stephure, Boon, MacKinnon, and Deveau (2009), increased involvement in online dating among older adults could be a response to diminished satisfaction with more conventional ways of establishing romances. Malta (2007) found that older adults (61–85 years), who use the Internet for dating, describe their online relationship as meaningful, intimate, and long-lasting.

The few studies that investigated older adults who use online dating sites used content analysis to evaluate how they advertise themselves (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009, 2013; McWilliams & Barrett, 2014) and their perceptions of the online relationships. Limited, if any, research has examined how online dating sites visually represent dating in later life and convey this to the target population, namely older adults. The current study examined the visual representations of older people on dating sites intended for the older population, with a particular focus on the presentation of age and gender.

Older adults and online dating: The intersection of age and gender

Previous research has revealed gender differences in approaches to dating. According to McWilliams and Barrett (2014, p. 429), women move toward new relationships more slowly than men do and use online dating as a way to “dip their toes” into the dating pool and test the waters. In contrast, men view online dating as a way to dive headfirst into new dating opportunities. In addition, different factors motivate men and women to try online dating. Men view online dating as a way to expand their options and facilitate an efficient transition to a new relationship, whereas women face limitations that increase the appeal of online dating. Their networks lack available men, and they feel hesitant to actively pursue men in face-to-face interactions. For women, online dating expands the universe of possible romantic partners and gives them greater control over the dating process (Vandeweerd et al., 2016).

However, older adults also express ambivalence toward online dating. Older women describe online dating as exciting and interesting but also stressful and demanding. Often, it establishes new cultural mores about sexual desire in later life, which lead women to feel “bombarded” by the new demands placed on them, especially in terms of figuring out how to win men’s attention at their age (Frohlick & Migliardi, 2011). Older men and women disclosed that while using online dating sites, they realized the age penalty operating in the dating market and employed various strategies,

including misrepresenting actual age and highlighting youthful identities and behaviors (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014).

Although older men and women might share the tension associated with the self-marketing process, the intersection of gender and age inequality results in differing experiences. Male sexual attractiveness is equated with socioeconomic status and occupational success, whereas physical appearance and youthfulness are prized in women (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; McWilliams & Barrett, 2014). Older women report constructing youthful images that are consistent with heteronormative standards of feminine sexuality and attractiveness, whereas men report creating profiles that highlight middle-class masculinity, including involvement in paid work and financial stability (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014).

These intersecting systems of inequality shape the process of seeking intimate relationships in online dating sites, creates challenges for older men and women regarding their representations, and poses particular challenges for older women who must carefully negotiate how they present themselves in their profiles in order to attract men successfully (Frohlick & Migliardi, 2011; McWilliams & Barrett, 2014; Whitty, 2008). In-depth interviews with 44 women aged 50 to 70 years old revealed that women respond to ageism and to the social obsession with youthfulness and discrimination against older people by employing cosmetic enhancements such as hair dye, makeup, cosmetic surgery, and nonsurgical cosmetic procedures in order to fight against social invisibility (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). The subtext underlying these advertisements portrays older people as unattractive and shapes public knowledge regarding aging as a pathological rather than a normal, natural process (González, 2007; Gott, 2005; Katz & Marshall, 2003).

Aging in the media

The present study focuses on representations of older adults on online dating sites. Aging in the media has shifted from visual under- and misrepresentation (negative images) of older adults to positive visual representations (Miller, 2004). According to Vickers (2007), the mass media have had an overall negative effect on society's attitudes toward aging as most people portrayed in the media are young and virile. Although, then number of older adults presented in the media increased from the 1980s into the '90s, the one-sided presentations of later life still create problems and misconceptions for both young and older adults. Although older people may be better understood because of their increased visibility in the media, one-dimensional representations of older adults as youthful, active, and rich might have negative consequences as well (Lee, Carpenter, & Meyers, 2007; Loos, 2013; Vickers, 2007; Ylanne, Williams, & Wadleigh, 2009). Wada, Hurd Clarke, and Rozanova (2015) found that the representations

of older adults in Canadian newspapers and magazines established and reinforced the paradox that while sexuality was crucial to remaining youthful and aging successfully, youth and beauty were essential requisites for active sexual engagement. They recommended that older adults use pharmaceutical and medical interventions to sustain and enhance sexual function in later life. As part of the youthfulness promoted by the media, plastic surgery, Botox injections, and various other treatments are advertised with the aim of making people look and feel younger (Vickers, 2007).

Advertisements for creams that “will make you look 10 years younger” do not send a positive message about aging. It has been argued that perhaps a commercial for an aging cream that brings out the best in your wrinkles, rather than trying to hide them, sends a more realistic and less ageist message regarding older adults (Vickers, 2007). A discourse analysis of how Canadian newspapers and magazines portray and construct older adults’ sexuality found that the ideal notion of remaining young-looking, physically attractive, and sexually active dominated (Wada et al., 2015). Unconsciously, this construct marginalizes older people who choose not to conform to that ideal or who are unable to do so. Whereas a more positive image of older people’s sexuality is certainly welcome, these kinds of advertisements and implicit messages to remain sexually active in older age have become indicators of success versus failure in the aging process (Gott, 2005; Katz, 2002; Katz & Marshall, 2003). A study that examined three online Dutch senior citizens’ organizations revealed that youthful seniors seemed to be dominant in all organizations. All sites examined contained images of vital older adults. Not a single image of a frail older adult could be found on any of the sites examined (Loos, 2013).

The present study

The present study sought to understand the intersection between age and gender through the eyes of online dating sites for older adults. This was done by examining how sites visually represent aging and older adults on their home page pictures. Our main interest is to understand how dating sites for older adults target this population. We examined how sites portray older adults and whether this visual portrayal conveys ageist and/or sexist messages. We further examined how diverse and varied the visual portrayal of older adults is or whether it presents a one-size-fits-all approach when portraying older adults as part of the dating scene. The study is complemented by a related study in which we report on the verbal contents delivered by online dating sites (authors’ own). Given a tendency of older adults to internalize societal stereotypes toward old age (Levy, 2009) and the increasing use of online dating sites by older adults,

this study is important, as it examines societal messages for older adults who seek online dating.

Methods

Sample

Dating sites for older adults were located and collected through the Google search engine during May 2016. The search included the phrase “dating site/s” combined with three common terms used to describe older adults: “older adults/people,” “mature,” and “senior/s.” Results were reviewed in the order in which they were presented in the Google search results. All sites that self-identified as targeting older adults for online dating were included in the final list of sites for review. The search ended when online dating sites for older adults started to repeat. To increase the validity of the final list, we reviewed six articles recommending online dating sites for older adults. They were obtained by the Google search using the key words “what are the best online dating sites for older adults/mature/seniors” and “recommended online dating sites for older adults/mature/senior.” The articles included sites that had been retrieved in the initial search. The search method identified 42 potential dating sites for older adults, two were removed as they were duplicates and one was irrelevant. Non-English-language sites were excluded. Sites were not excluded based on the country or region in which they operated. In fact, sites that had distinctive homepages in different countries were counted and analyzed separately. The final list contained 39 sites that were included in the study and visually analyzed. Most of the sites ($n = 25$; 64.10%) were global, nine sites (23.08%) were for the United Kingdom population, four sites (10.26%) were for the United States population, and one site limited the participation to only five countries (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and France).

Data analysis

The study focused only on the home page of the sites, because this is where the main message and contents of the site are explicitly presented, with visual presentation of the site’s messages commonly used (Loos, 2013). Our goal was to identify the main ways in which aging and gender were visually portrayed in the 39 online dating sites included in the study.

Visual thematic analysis (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015) includes exploring both the internal and external narratives of an image. In the current study, an internal narrative refers to the story that each image conveys to the reader about the interaction between aging and gender, whereas an external narrative refers to the broader landscape of the image (e.g., the background of the picture, other pictures presented in the homepage). We began by analyzing

the main picture in the homepage of the sites. Older adults presented in the picture were classified according to four categories: (a) general visible signs: facial expression, skin color, accessories (glasses and jewelry), type and color of top and bottom clothing, level of dressing, and makeup; (b) visible signs of aging: perceived age, hair color (dyed or not), and wrinkles; (c) relational features: level of proximity and eye contact between people in the picture, number of people in the picture and their sexual identity (e.g., heterosexual/same-sex couple); and (d) additional visible features of the picture such as locale and activity depicted.

The decision as to which factors to examine was based on the review and recommendations of MSW and PhD students in a qualitative research course. Facial expression was coded into eight values: smiling, smiling showing teeth, laughing, surprised, sad or disappointed, neutral, can't see face, or "other." Skin color was coded into three values: light skin color, dark skin color, or not relevant/can't see skin color; accessories were coded by glasses (yes, no, sunglasses) and jewelry (yes or no). Level of dressing was coded by the levels of dress intended to encourage sexual attraction. As actual standards vary widely, we relied on three levels of dressing: men and women who were fully dressed; men and women who were partially dressed, revealing certain parts of the body (such as arms); and men and women who were dressed sexually, revealing certain parts that potentially encourage the sexual attention of others (such as cleavage). Clothing color and type were noted (e.g., pink dress or white button-down shirt). Makeup was coded into four values (definitely has makeup, not sure, definitely does not have makeup, or cannot see face/not relevant) based on visible and colored makeup such as lipstick, eye shadow, eyeliner, and face powders as blush or bronzer. We did not examine non-visible makeup such as concealer and other makeup covers used for any extra coverage. Visible signs of aging were used to determine the person's perceived age. These are the most challenging to assess as they are subjective in nature, lack an objective and evident feature, and are also multidimensional. Perceived age was coded into five values: younger than 40, 40 to 50, 50 to 60, 60 to 70, or older than 70. Hair dye was coded into three values (yes, no, or not sure) and was based on a few dimensions such as hair color matching to one's perceived age, the match of hair to the eyebrow and eyelash color, and any visible roots or shaded color hair. Wrinkles were coded into four levels of visibility (high, moderate, low, or none), based on the surface of facial rhytids, folds, ridges, or creases in the skin. Level of proximity was examined by physical proximity, coded into four variables: very close (e.g., hugging and kissing), close (e.g., holding hands), not close (not touching but standing near each other), and distant (not touching and not near each other). Proximity was also examined by eye contact, which was either displayed (yes, looking at each other) or not (no, looking at the camera; no, looking somewhere else). Sexual identity (e.g., heterosexual/

same-sex couple) was assessed by two yes or no questions: (a) whether a couple is presented and (if so) whether the couple is heterosexual and (b) whether there are any visible signs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) relationships on the home page of the site. Finally, the location of the picture was coded as indoors or outdoors and followed by an open space for a more detailed description of the location and activity presented (e.g., in the park, walking the dog, biking in the mountains, or tanning on the beach). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize these data. Analysis was conducted by two independent raters for 20% of the sites in order to increase trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). Inconsistencies were discussed and agreed upon through consensus.

Results

All 39 sites were analyzed using visual thematic analysis and summarized using descriptive statistics. A total of 36 sites presented a picture of a heterosexual couple, while three sites differed from the others by presenting individual pictures of older adults. These three sites were analyzed separately. Gender differences in general and visible signs of aging are presented in Table 1. Relational and other visible features are presented in Table 2.

General visible signs

Facial expression

Among older men, 25 of the 36 sites (69.4%) presented facial expressions as *smiling with teeth*, and six sites (16.66%) presented them as *smiling* (not showing teeth). On two sites, facial expressions were not visible (they were pictured from the back) and three sites were identified as “other” (kissing with lips, one man had a glimpse of a smile and another man was pointing at something and seemed to be talking or explaining something to his partner). Among older women, 32 sites (88.9%) presented the facial expression as *smiling with teeth* and one site as *smiling* (not showing teeth). On two other sites, the facial expressions were not visible (they were pictured from the back) and on one site the facial expression was identified as “other” (kissing on the lips). The dominant facial feature presented on the online dating sites for older adults was smiling with teeth or just smiling (overall 86% for men and 91.7% for women).

Skin color

Out of 36 sites that presented a heterosexual couple, 35 (97.2%) presented the pair as light-skinned. Due to the light setting of the picture in one site, it was

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of general and aging visible signs presented in sites ($n = 36$).

	Men	Women
Facial expression		
Smiling showing teeth	25	32
Smiling	6	1
Other	3	1
Not visible	2	2
Skin color		
Light skin	35	35
Dark skin	-	-
Not visible	1	1
Eye color		
Blue	6	9
Honey/green	8	11
Brown	4	2
Not visible	18	14
Glasses		
Yes	7	1
No	24	30
Sunglasses	2	3
Not visible	3	2
Jewelry		
Yes	3	22
No	31	14
Not visible	2	2
Clothing color		
Cream/white	12	16
Blue	13	3
Pink	-	5
Purple	-	3
Green	1	
Grey	1	3
Black	1	1
Red	2	-
Brown	1	1
Yellow	3	1
Other	-	1
Not visible	4	2
Level of dressing		
Fully dressed	36	31
Moderately dressed	-	5
Sexually dressing	-	-
Makeup		
Yes	-	31
No	36	2
Not visible	-	3
Perceived age		
< 40	-	2
40–50	7	5
50–60	14	19
60–70	12	8
> 70	1	-
Not visible	2	2
Wrinkles		
High	6	7
Moderate	14	7
Low	11	12

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Men	Women
None	3	8
Not visible	2	2
Hair color		
Grey	32	2
Blonde	-	20
Brown	3	8
Black	-	1
Not visible	1	1
Bald/signs of baldness*	1	-
Hair dye		
Yes	1	31
No	33	4
Not visible	2	1
Signs of disability (e.g., wheelchair, walking stick, rollator)	-	-

Note. *Numbers indicate number of sites.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of relational visible signs presented in sites ($n = 36$).

	Number of sites
Proximity	
Very close	27
Close	8
Not close	1
Distant	-
Not visible	-
Eye contact between couple	
Yes	8
No, looking at camera	18
No, looking elsewhere	10
Location	
Indoors	8
Outdoors	28
Heterosexual vs. LGBTQI relationship	
Heterosexual	36
LGBTQI	-

Note. LGBTQI = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex.

difficult to identify the skin color of the couple and it was therefore left as “unknown/not visible.”

Eye color

In agreement with the dominant light skin color, 18 men with visible eye color had a light eye color, of blue ($n = 6$) or honey/green ($n = 8$). Only four sites presented men with brown eyes. However, the men’s eye color was not visible in 18 sites as they were wearing sunglasses, the picture was taken from

a distance, or they were gazing elsewhere. Among women whose eye color was visible ($n = 22$), the most dominant color was honey/green ($n = 11$), then blue ($n = 9$); the least popular was brown ($n = 2$). However, eye color was not visible on 14 sites (38.9%).

Accessories (glasses and jewelry)

In terms of jewelry, among older men, only three of 36 sites presented men with jewelry. Two sites out of the 36 sites were identified as “not noticeable” as they presented a vague or distant image, making it hard to determine whether the man was wearing jewelry. In contrast, 22 (55.6%) of the sites presented women with jewelry, whereas 14 sites did not. Accessories were not noticeable in two sites. In terms of glasses, 24 sites (66.7%) presented men without glasses, whereas 30 (83.3%) presented women without glasses. Only one site presented women with glasses and seven sites presented men with glasses. The rest either wore sunglasses (two men and three women) or were not noticeable (three men and two women whose faces were not presented in the picture or were taken from the back, for example).

Clothing

In terms of clothing, nearly half of the sites ($n = 17$; 47.2%) presented men with a tailored look (button-down shirt or suit), while the others presented men with a more casual look, wearing a T-shirt ($n = 2$), a polo shirt ($n = 7$), or a knitted sweater ($n = 8$). In two sites, it was impossible to identify the man's upper garments. Women usually had a casual look, wearing a T-shirt ($n = 13$, 36.1%) or a sweater ($n = 14$; 38.9%). The rest of the sites presented women in a button-down shirt ($n = 2$), a dress ($n = 2$), or a chiffon blouse ($n = 1$). The clothing could not be identified on four sites. Men were dressed blue ($n = 13$; 36.1%), cream or white ($n = 12$; 33.3%), green ($n = 1$), grey ($n = 1$), black ($n = 1$), red ($n = 2$), brown ($n = 1$), or yellow ($n = 3$). The color could not be identified on four sites. Women were presented primarily in tops that were white or cream-color ($n = 16$; 47.1%), pink ($n = 5$), purple ($n = 3$), blue ($n = 3$), grey ($n = 3$), black ($n = 1$), brown ($n = 1$), yellow ($n = 1$), or striped ($n = 1$). On two sites, the color of women's tops could not be identified. Most of the pictures presented on the sites show the hips and above ($n = 30$ for men and $n = 27$ for women), making it difficult to analyze the lower clothing for men or women. However, men were fully dressed on all sites. Women were mostly fully dressed ($n = 31$; 86.11%), while they were dressed moderately on only five sites (13.9%). None of the sites presented women in sexual dress (e.g., a low-cut neckline or shirt showing cleavage).

Makeup

The majority of sites ($n = 31$, 86.11%) presented women with makeup (the amount varied among sites). Three sites were not relevant (as they did not show the woman's face in the picture, were vague, or were taken from distance) and only two sites presented women without makeup.

Visible signs of aging

Perceived age

Although presented as online dating sites for older adults, the perceived age of most of the men was younger than 60 ($n = 21$; 58.3%). On seven sites, the perceived age was identified as 40 to 50 and on 14 sites as 50 to 60. Men's perceived age was identified as 60 to 70 on only 12 sites (33.33%), and only one site presented a man whose perceived age was older than 70. Men's perceived age could not be identified on two sites (due to picture setting). Among women, a low perceived age was even more apparent. Women's perceived age was identified as *less than 40* on two sites, between 40 and 50 on five sites and from 50 to 60 on another 19 sites (52.8%). The women's perceived age was 60 to 70 on only eight sites (22.2%). No site presented women whose perceived age was older than 70. Age could not be identified on two sites.

Wrinkles

In accord with the young perceived age presented in the pictures, most men had a moderate ($n = 14$) or low ($n = 11$) amount of wrinkles or none at all ($n = 3$). Only six sites (16.7%) presented men with a lot of wrinkles. On two sites, the amount of wrinkles could not be determined because the faces were not visible. Similarly, most women had a low ($n = 12$) or moderate ($n = 7$) amount of wrinkles or none ($n = 8$) at all. Only seven sites (19.44%) presented women with many visible wrinkles. The amount of wrinkles could not be determined on two sites, as the faces were not seen in the picture.

Hair

Only one site presented men with dyed hair, whereas 31 sites (86.11%) presented women with dyed hair. The rest were either not dyed (33 men and four women) or were undetermined (two men and one woman). Most sites (32; 88.9%) presented men with gray hair. The remaining men had

brown hair ($n = 3$) or it could not be determined ($n = 1$). In contrast, only two sites presented women with gray hair, whereas the rest were either blonde ($n = 20$; 55.56%), highlighted blonde ($n = 4$), brown ($n = 8$), or black ($n = 1$). On one site, women's hair color could not be determined due to picture settings. Finally, eight sites (22.22%) presented men with facial hair (beards, moustaches, etc.). However, only one site presented a man with signs of baldness.

Relational features

Level of proximity

Most sites presented the couple in close proximity ($n = 27$; 75%), described as *very close* (hugging or kissing). The rest of the sites presented couples very near to one another ($n = 8$, 22.2%), defined as *close* (holding hands, etc.). Only in one site, the couple demonstrated low levels of proximity, defined as *not close* (not touching at all).

Eye contact

Although demonstrating high levels of proximity, only eight sites (22.2%) displayed a picture with eye contact between the couple. Half of the sites ($n = 18$; 50%) presented a staged picture where the man and the woman were looking at the camera. On the remaining 10 sites (27.8%), men and women were gazing elsewhere (e.g., at the scenery).

Number of people presented in the picture and their sexual identity

Among the 39 sites retrieved in the initial search, most ($n = 36$; 92.31%) presented a main picture of a heterosexual couple.

Additional visible features of the picture

Location

Most of the pictures presented ($n = 28$; 77.8%) were taken with a scene from nature in the background (e.g., beach, park, forest, garden). Only eight sites showed photos taken indoors. Some of the sites presented older adults in activities as bike riding, walking in the park, or on the beach and walking a dog.

Analysis of the remaining three sites

Three sites differed from the others, as they presented a collage of ten or more pictures and not one main picture. Two sites were similar in their message, presenting pictures of heterosexual couples only. All couples had light skin (except for one with dark skin) and perceived age younger than 60. Most women had dyed blonde hair; men had gray hair. The couples in the collage were smiling and in loving positions with close proximity (e.g., hugging and kissing). Most pictures showed couples engaged in various activities together, such as riding bicycles, drinking wine, dancing, cooking, hiking, walking on the beach, and swimming. One site showed approximately 60 pictures of individual older adults. These pictures presented a large variety of older adults, from different ethnic backgrounds, with and without glasses and of various perceived ages. The adults were not engaged in different activities and the pictures were mainly facial close-ups.

Discussion

The study examined visual presentations of older adults in online dating sites. Visual analysis revealed a clear intersection between ageism and sexism in the presentation of older adults in online dating sites for seniors.

Agelessness is ageist

In terms of age, our findings reflect a trend toward positive portrayals of older adults (Miller, 2004; Zhang, Harwood, Williams, & Wadleigh, 2006) as uniformly healthy, active, and happy, as enjoying time with friends and family, and as competent and capable. Signs of aging, such as wrinkles, gray hair, loss of hair, or eyeglasses were absent from most pictures. Features indicating physical difficulties, such as a cane, a walker, or even a wheelchair were not present at all. These visual symbols are in alignment with the generally low perceived age of the men and women in the pictures. Although 60 and older is the official threshold for defining old age and for retirement in the western world (World Health Organization, 2002), most of the men and women pictured on the sites appeared to be younger than 60. The young-looking images of older adults reflected in the media are advocated by the anti-aging industry and obligate older adults to prolong middle age and to minimize the extent to which aging is apparent (Andrews, 1999; Calasanti & Tech, 2007). Men and women are expected to spend time, money, and effort to fit youthful ideals and to remain sexually attractive (Calasanti & Tech, 2007; Wada et al., 2015). In our study, old men and women who did not fit these ideals and did not represent successful and youthful aging were simply not found on the sites.

The dominance of smiling facial expression in all pictures fits within the framework of successful aging, which often describes older adults as healthy, active, productive, optimistic, engaged, energetic, adventurous, happy, humor-filled, intellectual, active, and maintaining their relationships with people (Calasanti & Tech, 2015; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). However, it seems that rather than decreasing ageism, the concept of successful aging is a source of tension and fear for older adults, as they realize that it is beyond their control (Calasanti & Tech, 2015). This can result in implicit self-blame or blaming others for failing to age successfully.

Finally, although men and especially women are pressured to look young and attractive, older adults were presented in the pictures fully dressed. The high standards of modest dressing across all sites may imply that sexual activity is not the focus of the dating process. By this, sites might place ambivalence on older adults, as they are allegedly supposed to remain young-looking and in good physical shape, but not sexually attractive or active (Wada et al., 2015). Fully dressing older adults and maintaining high levels of modesty is an interesting choice of dating sites for older adults. Dressing is part of the broader definition of sexuality (Tarzia, Bauer, Fetherstonhaugh, & Nay, 2013) and perceived age (Laz, 2003). Older adults are pressured to “dress their age” (Rowntree & Zufferey, 2015, p.156) in a way that is more modest, by extension, and less overtly sexual (Rowntree & Zufferey, 2015). Hence, the present findings correspond with this tendency. However, for many older adults, their dressing style is an expression of femininity (Yun, Kim, & Chung, 2014) and improves their self-esteem and promotes sexuality (Baldissera, Bueno, & Hoga, 2012). Therefore, the choice to dress older adults in a highly modest and conservative manner may reflect ageism and imply the absence of interest in or desire for sexual activity in old age (Montemurro & Siefken, 2014; Nay, McAuliffe, & Bauer, 2007).

Intersecting inequalities

Older women and men deal with ageism, which can affect their perceptions and attitudes or restrict their behavior in some way. However, older women are further restricted by sexism, confronting a double challenge as they age. The intersection between ageism and sexism is expressed by the physical appearance of older men and women. For example, gray hair or wrinkles mark women as “old” well before they do for men (Calasanti & Tech, 2007). The cultural belief that age diminishes sexual attractiveness applies earlier and more strongly to women than to men and leaves women with a smaller pool of sexual partners available than it does men (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2009). Social norms pair younger women with older men (Carpenter et al., 2009), and older men report being more attracted to and interested in younger women (Bayler-Levaro, 2011). For the most part, older men adhere to the common assumption that

older women are asexual. Hence, they tend to seek younger women for sexual fulfillment (Bayler-Levaro, 2011). Our findings demonstrate this inequality, as the majority of online dating sites presented women with a young perceived age and few visible wrinkles, wearing jewelry and having blonde or light brown dyed hair. These pictures suggest that women need to present themselves as young and attractive in order to win a man's attention. The study's findings reveal that signs of aging, such as graying hair and wrinkles, are not viewed as signs of character, accomplishment, and experience, but rather are seen as attributes that should be diminished within the cultural aspect of youthfulness as an ideal, in which wrinkles are a sign of unattractiveness (González, 2007; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). Compared with women, men in the study had gray hair and more wrinkles and were more likely to wear glasses. The different presentation and portrayal of men might imply that older men are judged less by their physical appearance and more on how they perform financially (Calasanti & Tech, 2007). The establishment of stereotypical beliefs are also demonstrated by the color-gender associations in the clothing of men and women (Cunningham & Macrae, 2011; Karniol, 2011; Yang & Li, 2016). Whereas men are mainly presented in a gender-stereotypic color such as blue, women are dressed in gender-stereotypic color but also in opposite-sex-stereotypic colors such as blue and gray. Dressing men in blue can emphasize men's masculinity in contrast to women (Koller, 2008) or imply the importance of masculinity for men in later life (Arrington, 2003; Gledhill & Schweitzer, 2014).

The present study indicates not only the preferred models of aging and gender roles but also the social regulation of sexuality, placing heterosexuality as superior. All the sites that included couples presented a heterosexual, light-skinned couple, whereas the other three sites presented individuals (none as a same-sex couple). The intersection between ageism and heterosexism may have a negative effect on older adults' psychological well-being (Neville, Adams, Bellamy, & George, 2014). The aging process itself is a personal, socioemotional, psychological construct that is guided by self-perceptions throughout later-life development. Older gay and lesbian adults, particularly those with negative self-perceptions, may be more prone to the consequences of marginalization associated with aging and may be susceptible to actual and perceived negative outcomes of aging, such as experiences of loss and grief, physical deterioration, loneliness, not recovering from illness, and dependency (Neville et al., 2014).

Conclusions

The online dating sites examined in this study misrepresent aging in ways that could be unfortunate for many viewers and especially for older adults. These sites present aging as a narrow, yet happy and easy process. Older adults are portrayed as vibrant, successful, young-looking, and joyful after finding a new love. However, these portrayals do not reflect the wide range of experiences people

undergo with aging and exclude many older adults. The subtext message is that love, intimacy, and sexual activity are available only to those older adults who are “young forever” and do not face, cope with, or show any visible signs of aging. The sites allow only one possibility, namely, finding heterosexual love in middle age.

Positive images serve important functions for older individuals, but if they are inaccurate or allow no other alternative, they lead to mistaken feelings and perceptions of older individuals. Rather than supporting the discourse of decline, the current narrative of successful aging eliminates it from the discourse. Online dating sites for older adults, similar to other media representations of older adults, should provide a more accurate and balanced view of aging that will allow older adults to truly identify with the possibilities these sites have to offer.

Limitations, contribution, and future research

The categories used for classifying the images were constructed based on the subjective decision process of the authors. Possibly, other raters would have reached a different classification of categories. It is also important to note that all the sites analyzed were in English and therefore findings likely reflect regional populations and preferences. Finally, the study focused only on the visual aspect of the sites and only on the main picture presented. Nonetheless, the results clearly demonstrate the intersection between ageism and sexism conveyed by most online dating sites. Furthermore, while current findings indicate that most online dating sites present older adults in a positive light, the approach of ageless seniors might be ageist by reinforcing stereotypes that may be unrealistic for older adults. More definitive work is needed to examine the impact of the visual representations of older adults on online dating sites on actual attitudes toward older adults and on how older adults internalize these representations.

Implications

The implications of this research are of relevance to different services and products offered to the older population, especially those that aim to enhance or relive the intimate life of older adults. The findings in this study portray older adults from a narrow perspective and create some ambiguity concerning the target population. Given the large diversity of the aging process and older adults in general, the negative influence of presenting aging as unidimensional—either as sick, ill, and lonely or as successful, energetic, and sociable—should be considered. Aging should be affirmed within a framework that embraces diversity and applies to marginalized groups of older individuals as well as to older adults that represent the “ideal.” Older adults in their eighth, ninth, and tenth decades of life, whether currently widowed, divorced, or single lifelong, heterosexual or LGBTQI, should be granted equal

opportunity to experience intimate relationships. As Vickers (2007) wished to turn on the television and see a commercial for an aging cream that brings out the best in your wrinkles rather than trying to hide them, we wish that dating sites for older adults would present a diverse portrayal of older adults and aging and not convey a message in which intimacy is preserved for the young and healthy. Services aimed to the older population should confront social representations that can be oppressive, such as the struggle against aging, youthfulness as an ideal, and rigid gender roles.

Conflicts of interest

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