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Senior, mature or single: A qualitative analysis of homepage advertisements of dating sites for older adults

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ABSTRACT

In light of the growing importance of online dating sites for older adults and their potential for increased social support and leisure activities, the present study assessed the verbal contents of homepage advertisements of online dating sites. We identified dating sites for older adults through the *Google* web-search engine, during May 2016. All verbal information available on the homepage of the sites was used for analysis purposes. Qualitative content analysis was conducted, using open coding, followed by grouping of codes into major themes. A first theme, named, "*how are older adults described*?" addressed the advertised characteristics of the target population. Older adults, were portrayed in positive-neutral terms vs. negative terms. A second theme, named, "*what do older adults want?*" described the main purpose of each site as promoting long-term relationship or even marriage vs. companionship or flirting. Ambivalence about old age is evident in the ways older adults and dating sites are advertised.

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1. Introduction

The internet has become a popular venue for enhancing one's social network, with online dating sites turning ever more popular in the past two decades (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). Despite a general notion that older adults are not technologically savvy and as a result, might face multiple barriers in accessing the internet (Gatto & Tak, 2008), research has shown that over half of Americans age 65 and older use emails and the internet (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012).

With increasing age, some older adults may face a dwindling social network as a result of retirement and the death and sickness of partners, friends and family members (Wrzus, Hänel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013). Reduced physical ability and mobility might make the internet a particularly valuable way for developing and maintaining social networks (Cotten, Anderson, & McCullough, 2013). In support of this claim, research (Nimrod, 2011) has argued for the beneficial effects of senior online communities. Senior online communities are thought to provide older adults with meaningful opportunities to maintain, enhance and demonstrate their abilities (Nimrod, 2011). Online communities also provide opportunities to obtain social support and growth and even enhance older adults' mental health (Nimrod, 2010).

Despite the documented potential benefits of the internet to older adults, research on non-dating online sites for older adults (Levy, Chung, Bedford, & Navrazhina, 2014) has shown that even sites on Facebook that specifically focus on older adults tend to be quite ageist. It was concluded that instead of empowering older adults, these sites advocate for the exclusion of older adults from society (Levy et al., 2014). The negative portrayal of older adults on Facebook is consistent with ageist messages found in traditional media, such as newspapers or television programs (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000; Kay & Furnham, 2013). For instance, older adults are often ignored all together and regarded as an invisible sector of the population. Other times, older adults are presented as caricatures or sources of ridicule. Moreover, older adults tend to feature only in advertisements that specifically target older adults, rather than in advertisements for the general population (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000; Kay & Furnham, 2013). Similar findings were reported with regard to the new media, which tends to criticize, infantilize and advocate for the exclusion of older adults (Levy et al., 2014).

Past research has pointed out to prominent intersections between ageism and sexism in the media (Calasanti, 2007) as well as in other settings (McGann et al., 2016). Although both men and

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women are negatively affected by ageism (Allan, Johnson, & Emerson, 2014), there has been a greater emphasis on attractiveness, health and fitness as sources of women's power. These qualities tend to deteriorate as people age (Chrisler, Rossini, & Newton, 2015). Hence, as women age, they tend to be negatively stereotyped and become invisible (Clarke & Griffin, 2008), but men oftentimes, are depicted positively even as they age (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012; Vernon, Williams Jr, Phillips, & Wilson, 1991). From early on, women invest in their physical appearance (Tiggemann, 2004). Yet, dissatisfaction with their appearance seems to be prevalent among women of all age groups, with the exception of women of very old age, who tend to be less concerned about their physical appearance and more concerned about their functioning (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011). Men on the other hand, appear to be less concerned or dissatisfied with their physical appearance throughout the adult life course (Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012; Spedale, Coupland, & Tempest, 2014).

These well-documented gender differences in attitudes towards one's aging appearance were attributed to the evolutionary role of youth among women, who have a limited child-bearing period (Archer, 1996). Men, on the other hand, take the role of providers and as such, their financial status and professional success are seen as more important than their youth. Moreover, in contrast to women, men's fertility does not diminish completely as they age. Hence, their advanced age does not necessarily reduce their attractiveness (Wiederman & Allgeier, 1992).

These arguments (Archer, 1996 (Wiederman & Allgeier, 1992);) are consistent with research on dating sites for older adults. Research (Burrows, 2013; Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014) has repeatedly shown that men are more likely to present status symbols, including their property, financial success or professional status, whereas women are more likely to emphasize their attractive physical appearance. A different research has found gender differences in the preferences of older adults: although both older men and older women attempt to present a youthful appearance and to seek out youthful partners, older men are more likely to look for commitment in relations, whereas older women tend to seek companionship, rather than intimacy (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014). These findings clearly suggest that gender and not only age should be taken into account in order to better contextualize the portrayal of older adults by online dating sites.

Despite the growing popularity of online dating sites for older adults (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009), to the best of our knowledge, there has been no research on the contents used for advertising purposes by these sites. Advertising for older adults should take into account the unique characteristics, needs and preferences of older adults (Zhang et al., 2006). This is because older adults are known to have somewhat different re-partnering styles compared with younger adults (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Benson & Coleman, 2016). Specifically, fears of future health decline and the need to provide caregiving services to one's partner or to share the inheritance with step-children, rather than directly transfer to biological children, tend to hinder older adults from formally establishing their partnership (Funk & Kobayashi, 2014).

These findings have been supported by research on online daters that found age differences in mate preferences; researchers have noted that older adults are more likely to mention health or a-sexual relationship as motivations for the relationship (Coupland, 2000). This is contrasted with younger adults, who mention motivations, such as seeking one's soulmate, adventure or romance (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2013). In addition, compared with younger adults, older adults were more likely to be highly selective in their mate preferences and to be willing to travel a great distance in order to meet these preferences (McIntosh, Locker, Briley, Ryan, & Scott, 2011). A contemporary study has shown that older adults

are more likely to use first person plural pronounces, and talk about health and positive emotions, whereas younger adults are more likely to use singular pronounces and explicitly talk about their career achievements (Davis & Fingerman, 2016).

1.1. The present study

The main research question proposed by this study concerned the portrayal of older adults by online dating sites that specifically target older adults. The present study aimed to assess the verbal contents delivered by online dating sites. Theoretically, we draw from research on the role of language as shaping social structures and power relations in society (Reid & Ng, 1999). This has long been recognized by the feminist literature in the early 70's (Lakoff, 1973). As a result of this understanding, there have been attempts to use a more gender neutral language. However, these attempts too, have been criticized as offending readers of both sexes due to their stereotypical nature (Bales, 2002). Research in the field of ageism still lags behind research on sexism (Nelson, 2004). Hence, the concepts of age neutral language vs. ageist language (e.g., use of the term older adults vs. the elderly, respectively) has received acknowledgement decades later (Gendron, Welleford, Inker, & White, 2016). Moreover, it has been argued that even gerontologists, who study old age, perpetuate the negative image of older adults through the use of language which equates aging with frailty and portrays the aging demographics as a societal challenge (Palmore, 2000; Schaie, 1993).

A better assessment of the contents presented by online dating sites is important given past research (Levy, 2009) which has shown that older adults tend to internalize age stereotypes portrayed by society. In light of the growing importance of online dating sites for older adults and the high potential for increased social support and leisure activities promoted by online sites (Nimrod, 2011), it is essential to better assess the contents conveyed by these sites. These sites can be seen as producing the image of older adults and dating in old age in society and as reflecting current societal views (Bruner, 1991; Gendron et al., 2016). Either way, online dating sites likely capture a growing place in the lives of older daters and as such, the messages portrayed by these sites should be assessed. Moreover, we know that once negative age stereotypes are internalized, they have deleterious health and wellbeing effects (Avidor, Ayalon, Palgi, & Bodner, 2016; Ayalon, 2016; Hausdorff, Levy, & Wei, 1999). Hence, a critical evaluation of the verbal contents presented by online dating sites can potentially assist in better tailoring the contents conveyed by these sites.

2. Methods

The present study is a qualitative study designed to evaluate the verbal portrayal of older adults by online dating sites for older adults. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the authors' university. We identified dating sites for older adults through the *Google* web-search engine during May 2016. The search included the following key words: *Dating site/s*, *Older adults/ people, Mature, Senior/s*. Sites that targeted older adults for online dating were included in the final list. Sites were not excluded based on the country or region they operated in. In fact, sites that had distinctive homepages in different countries were reviewed separately. Sites that did not communicate in English were excluded. The search concluded when duplicate online dating sites appeared. We also reviewed six articles that recommended online dating sites for older adults. These articles were obtained by the Google web-search, under the key-terms "*What are the best online dating sites for older adults/mature/seniors*" and "*recommended online dating*

sites for older adults/mature/senior." The articles confirmed the sites that were already 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 had irrelevant content. The final list contained 39 sites that were included for analysis. The homepages of these 39 sites represented the unit of analysis) Graneheim & Lundman, 2004 (Most of the sites (n = 25; 64.10%) were global/international, nine (n = 9; 23.08%) targeted the United Kingdom, four (n = 4; 10.26%) targeted the United States and one site (n = 1; 2.56%) targeted five possible countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and France). It is important to note that although the sites were selected because they specifically targeted older adults, they could have practically served individuals of any age.

2.1. Analysis

We used qualitative content analysis given the fact that we had no a-priori hypotheses about the research topic, as it has not been previously explored. This method provides an adequate way to capture verbal messages as they are presented in real life, rather than to obtain second-hand information about the sites from interviews with web-designers or advertisers involved in online dating sites. Given a general wish of most people not to appear ageist or sexist, it is likely that interviews with stakeholders would have revealed socially desirable messages (Cherry, Allen, Denver, & Holland, 2015).

Content analysis was conducted in August—September, 2016. We first read the homepage (e.g., advertisements made by the site director) of each of the identified websites for broad units of meaning (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). All verbal information available on the homepage of the sites was used for analysis purposes. Both inducting and deductive reasoning were employed in creating the coding scheme (Reichertz, 2009). Following a thorough read of the homepages, temporary codes were developed based on their unit of meaning (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). We attempted to regard the coding of the data with no a-priori assumptions and the first stage of the analysis consisted of open coding (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Verbal contents presented on each of the homepages received a descriptive code. Because of relative homogeneity across sites, we reached content saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) early in the coding process and the remaining sites were coded along major codes identified via the initial open coding process. To create a coherent story-line, we reclassified some of the codes to create more consistent and elaborate categories. For instance, sites' promotion of their older clientele was initially classified under a code named, "the advantages of the website," but subsequently was reunited with a code named, "positive-neutral terms to describe older adults." Consistent with the idea of selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), we omitted a theme named, "the advantages/risks of online dating sites," because this theme appeared to be somewhat irrelevant to the main storyline of the present paper. Coding was conducted by two independent raters for 20% of the sites in order to increase trustworthiness by ensuring inter-rater reliability (Shenton, 2004). The first author, a clinical psychologist with over a decade of qualitative experience coded all homepages, whereas the second author, a graduate student in social work, coded 20% of the sites to establish inter-rater reliability. Inconsistencies were discussed between the two raters and agreement was established through a consensus.

2.2. Establishing sources of trustworthiness

We established credibility by selecting the most appropriate meaning unit for coding purposes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The selected unit is not too broad and complex, and at the same time, not too narrow in scope. The coding of the data was conducted by two independent researchers and disagreements were discussed. In addition, we bring thick descriptions from the websites to illustrate our coding system. We also kept an audit trail (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993), which clearly documents the process of analysis.

3. Results

In reviewing the homepages of the dating sites, two major thematic categories were identified. The first theme addressed the characteristics of the target population, namely older adults. This theme was sub-divided to reflect the use of positive or neutral terms to describe older adults and their characteristics vs. the use of negative terms to describe older adults. The second theme concerned the main purpose of the site. Broadly defined, this theme, too, was divided into two sub-themes. The first sub-theme promoted long-term relationship or even marriage. This sub-theme was contrasted with a competing sub-theme which advocated for companionship or flirting, rather than long-term relationship goals. A third sub-theme addressed the recommended age difference between partners. Below is a detailed account of the two major themes identified, accompanied by direct quotes from the online dating sites.

3.1. How are older adults described?

This category was divided into two sub-themes. The first sub-theme included statements which had a positive or a neutral valence concerning older adults, whereas the second sub-theme included statements of a more negative connotation.

3.1.1. A positive or neutral description of older adults

All 39 sites used positive or neutral terms to describe older adults. The most common descriptors were the terms *senior* and *mature*. These were followed by the provision of a concrete chronological age brackets to define potential users of the dating site. Even though setting a lower age limit was common, most sites were inconsistent and did not set a clear age limit. For instance, some sites started by declaring their target audience as people who were *40* years old and over, but the small print actually discussed people in their 50's, 60's or even *70's*. The most common target generation was that of the baby boomers (mentioned by five sites), but one site even mentioned the terms *generation Xers* or *midlife risers*. Although the terms *old* or *older* were used as search words to identify sites, only nine of the sites used these terms.

The term *single* was mentioned by 31 sites to describe the client population. Given current demographic trends, it is likely that older adults who approach online dating sites are either divorced or widowed, yet most sites used the term single. Possibly, the term single has a more neutral or positive connotation compared with other family statuses. Nonetheless, one site specifically targeted widowers (but not widows), stressing the interaction between ageism and sexism. The site had called for "*women out there that are strong, understanding and open minded to accept the challenge* [of widowhood]," *promising that* "*some* [potential partners] *understand better than other.*"

Older adults were described as *smarter, more experienced, assertive; know what they want, rich and successful* compared with younger adults. According to the sites, older adults have already *achieved a family life, career and status.* They were portrayed as being at the "*prime of their life.*"

Sites described the advantages of old age to older adults in the

potential role of partner seekers as well as partners being sought after. This was done by emphasizing the experience and wisdom of older adults, who have already been in relationships before. In order to encourage older adults to seek out new relationships, sites emphasized their past experience as an advantage that would help them to navigate dating again. Words of wisdom, such as "*you are as old as you feel*" were provided in order to encourage older adults to use online dating sites and pursue dating again.

3.1.2. Negative connotations of older adults

Of the 39 sites, 29 used negative terms to describe their target audience, namely, older adults (always in conjunction with neutral-positive terms as described above). The term *cougar* was used to describe women, who date younger men, whereas terms such as *sugar daddy, sugar momma, hot nanny,* or *mature daddies* were also used. These terms reflect supposedly positive qualities that one can find in older people, such as financial stability, care, power, or protection. Although these qualities are valued in society, when they are presented as a major motive for a relationship, they become undesirable as their presence, in the absence of other qualities, questions the sincerity of the relationship and turns older adults into objects.

Older adults were presented as loners, whose social networks were dwindling. Dating in old age was portrayed as difficult, "*not easy to pick yourself up and start dating when over 50;*" "*50 and beyond give up ever meeting a new partner or friends*" or as people who have been "*out of the game for too long.*" Other negative statements were made in an effort to show empathy and understanding towards older adults "*Not easy to pick yourself up and start dating when over 50;*" "*Young people are not the only ones who seek spiritual soulmates or exciting physical intimacy.*" Although the content of the last statement is not negative, the use of negation implicitly introduces negative stereotypes about older adults.

Similarly, many statements were meant to convey a positive message through the negation of common negative stereotypes. We placed these statements under the rubric of negative connotations of older adults because by negating the negative, one re-emphasizes its symbolic presence. Statements such as "*it is never too late to find love,*" or "*no time like the present,*" " *don't let your age curb your enthusiasm for finding a new partner... it doesn't matter how long ago you stopped dating; *" " *The times in which senior dating was a thing to be ashamed of are gone, *" aim to reflect positive thinking about older adults and encourage them to take action, but at the same time, these terms reemphasize and even strengthen some of the negative common stereotypes about this age group.

Making a firm distinction between young and old was a common tactic, which we classified as negative because age was treated as a meaningful characteristic, despite its potentially arbitrary nature: "*People in their 50 and 60 and beyond want different things from those 40, 30 or 20.*" Some sites explicitly stated that older adults were missing some of the essential advancements that have taken place over the past few decades: "*the rest of the world progressed in interesting ways;*" "*these individuals*[older adults] *probably haven't been on a date since they were in their 20's or 30's and are trying to get into the dating world after a long absence;*" " *dating has changed, forget about the idea that dating in your 40s, 50s, or older is the same as in your 20's.*"

One site also contrasted dating older people with the supposedly, well-known advantages of dating younger people: "*Younger women are more vibrant, spontaneous, full of life, have less baggage... dating younger women as a mid-life crisis, friends and colleagues frown at you... younger men are open, more understanding.*" A different site explicitly argued that older adults should be excluded from certain social situations or areas: "*might get in your head that you are too old to go to bars crowded with young people ... obviously

we are not suggesting that you try to go into your old university pub for a discount pint, but going into a nice after work bar in the city is perfectly fine ... dating had always been for the younger crowd.*"

3.2. What do older adults want?

All sites reviewed were designed for dating purposes, yet we divided this broad aim into two major sub-themes. The first presented an overall goal of love and marriage, whereas a second sub-theme, emphasized companionship, community relations or fun as the main relationship goals. All sites reviewed mentioned only heterosexual relations.

3.2.1. Love and marriage: long-term relations as a desired norm

Of the 39 sites reviewed, 37 advocated for long-term relations as a desired outcome. Sites promised customers that they will find "*love ... strong lasting relationship... something in common... partner for love and life ... connect on a deeper level... a chance to feel blessed and loved again... a someone who will hold a special place in your heart... your potential soulmate.*" One site even bragged that it was responsible for 4% of all marriages in the U.S.: "*438 get married per day (4% of US marriages).*"

3.2.2. Companionship as a goal

In 34 of the sites, potential alternative goals to love and marriage were discussed. The most common stated non-long-term goals were dating or companionship. Other goals were meeting new friends and establishing a community of like-minded people, who share common interests and activities. Social networking and emotional support were mentioned as potential advantages. Dating sites emphasized certain social activities as their purpose. These included activities such as, "*fun... a dinner companion ... a travel partner ... a gold buddy ... wine tasting ... classes... master new cuisines,*" or simply, "*filling the time.*" Four sites also promoted the idea of sex, hookup and passion as potential goals. This was contrasted with other sites that mentioned platonic relationship or "*just friendship.*" It is important to note that these goals were most often conveyed in conjunction with the "ultimate goals" of love and marriage or some other type of serious long-term relationship. Hence, these goals were not perceived as being sufficient on their own.

3.2.3. Age compatibility vs. age difference

There was one exceptional site with regard to the age brackets advocated for. This site preached for the advantages of an age gap between partners. It specifically "marketed" older women to young men and young women to older men. Its older female clients were portrayed as objects rather than as active consumers. The site communicated the relative advantages of old age to younger consumers: "*older women make younger men comfortable... young women are less experienced and less stable... older women are in a better financial place... take a dominant role in the relationship... young men are looking for cougars... more life experiences to learn from... age differences are no longer important, life is short-act now.*" Although some advantages associated with dating younger men by older women were briefly mentioned by that site, the emphasis was on the advantages of dating older women.

In contrast, when viewing the same site, older men learned that "*younger women come with less baggage... more vibrant, spontaneous and full of life.*" There was no attempt to describe older men to younger women. Hence, the site focused on objectifying women of all age groups. This site is contrasted with other sites, which emphasized age compatibility and the advantages associated with finding people just like you: "*meeting older men and attractive women in your age group;*" "*likeminded people*" or "*everyone over 50.*"

4. Discussion

Online dating sites offer the potential of social networking and re-partnering even when mobility and social support are on the decline. Given the increasing popularity of dating sites for older adults (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009), the tendency of older adults to internalize negative age-stereotypes (Levy, 2009), and the adverse impact that internalizing negative age stereotypes has (Ayalon, 2016; Levy, Zonderman, Slade, & Ferrucci, 2009), it is particularly important to identify the main messages conveyed by these sites. The present study originated from the rationale that language can both portray and help to build social structures (Bruner, 1991; Gendron et al., 2016). Hence, a critical examination of messages conveyed by online dating site can help to better tailor these sites to the needs of older adults and could potentially raise awareness to negative messages directed at older adults by these sites.

A major finding concerns the portrayal of older adults, who constitute the consumers or the target group of online dating sites. The fact that most sites portrayed both negative and positive qualities of older adults is consistent with the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). According to the model, older adults are stereotyped as possessing both positive qualities such as warmth and negative qualities such as incompetence. These qualities result in feelings of pity towards older adults (Fiske et al., 2002). The attribution of both positive and negative qualities to older adults is common not only in western societies, but also in non-western cultures (Marcus & Sabuncu, 2016). In the present study, some of the messages conveyed, specifically aimed to encourage older adults to take action and participate in the dating scene, but also communicated a sense of pity about older adults' inexperience and inadequacy. The use of both positive and negative terms to describe older adults could reflect negative societal views of older adults in the face of commercial needs to appeal to them as the client population.

Almost all sites used some neutral or positive terms to define their target population. The use of positive terms is not surprising given the fact that dating sites for older adults specifically target this age group. Hence, these sites should convey positive messages or at least neutral messages to attract their potential clients. Nonetheless, even the supposedly "neutral" messages conveyed were ambivalent at best. For instance, sites gave a very wide lower age limit to define their target audience, with some sites starting at 40, but moving quickly to individuals over 70. This represents an attempt to capture as wide clientele as possible. However, it also creates some ambiguity concerning the target population, given the very wide age range these sites claim to be catering for. Nonetheless, it is important to note that artificial age brackets create an artificial distinction between groups solely based on their chronological age. Yet, given the fact that these sites explicitly targeted older adults, this artificial division was built-in in their purpose and therefore, is expected.

The main positive qualities attributed to older adults were maturity, being "at the prime of their life," "knowing what they want," and "having already obtained success and achievements in life." Interestingly, some of these same qualities were also presented in a negative light, when terms such as "a sugar daddy or a hot nanny" were used. Even though these latter terms supposedly, reflect positive qualities, such as the achievement of money, success and care, their use objectifies older adults and as such, carries a negative connotation. Other references to older adults as lonely or "anxious to start over again" were made in an attempt to be empathic and encouraging, but at the same time, conveyed negative stereotypes about older adults.

Differentiating between young and old and advertising that older people have different relationship needs were common claims made by sites. Even though these claims were meant to be benign, they portrayed older adults as an out group, which was different from the majority group of young people. In an attempt to sound positive, sites negated popular stereotypes about older adults. Although, this too, was meant to be positive, it actually served as a reminder of negative stereotypes that advocated for the exclusion of older adults from social life and reemphasized the social losses that occur in old age. These findings are consistent with past research (Levy et al., 2014), which has found ageist messages online. Nonetheless, these findings are surprising because all sites had older adults as their main clientele, yet, they tended to refer to this population with ambivalence and implicit negativity. Possibly, the use of implicit negative messages in the present study, rather than explicit ones is a result of the fact that the sites were designed for older adults.

The intersection between ageism and sexism is well-documented (McGann et al., 2016; Mcmullin & Berger, 2013; Öberg & Tornstam, 1999). This study further confirms this intersection by demonstrating that at least some of the sites differentially describe older men and older women. Whereas older men are more likely to be endorsed for their wealth and success (e.g., sugar daddy), older women are marketed for their appearance or care capabilities (e.g., hot nanny). This distinction was particularly pronounced in one site, which ignored older women as active clients, but instead, attempted to "sell" their qualities to younger men. Older men, in return, receive a detailed explanation regarding the advantages of dating younger women. Hence, that particular site objectified women and treated them as a commodity, unrelated to their age. This approach contributes to power imbalance between men and women and may also perpetuate it (De Beauvoir, 1949, 2014).

All sites, with no exception promoted only heterosexual relations. This is unfortunate given the fact that loneliness and limited social network tend to be higher among older lesbian, gay, and bi-sexual (LGB) individuals compared with heterosexual individuals (Grossman, D'Augelli, & O'Connell, 2001; Willis, Antony Smith, & Green, 2016). To approach online dating sites for older LGB, one has to specifically ask for these attributes as search terms, as apparently, these services are not readily promoted via mainstream sites. The reliance on designated sites, separate from mainstream dating sites, further increases the segregation of this group, but may not differ from the general tendency of LGBs of other age groups to have their own designated sites (Gudelunas, 2012).

The most dominant type of relationship, presented as the ultimate goal of older adults was love and marriage. Finding one's soulmate and establishing a long-term relationship were advocated by most sites. Some sites added alternative motives to the relationship, such as having fun, dating or even establishing a social community. Nonetheless, the strong emphasis on long-term, formally established relationship is in contrast with current knowledge on re-partnering preferences among older adults. For instance, past research has shown that living apart together is a very common partnering style in old age because of the preference of older adults not to formalize their relationship (Benson & Coleman, 2016; De Jong Gierveld, 2004), yet this type of relationship was not mentioned at all by any of the sites. Moreover, past research has also shown that health issues play a major role and at times, even a motive in older adults' re-partnering considerations (Benson & Coleman, 2016). Yet, health issues were not mentioned by any of the sites. Possibly, sites did not specifically tailor their contents to the actual needs and preferences of older adults, but rather reflected values and perceptions currently advocated by younger adults, who likely represent the majority of people who design and run the dating sites.

The findings of this study should be viewed in the context of its limitations. First, this study focused only on English-language online dating sites. It is possible that non-English online dating sites are different. In addition, the division into thematic categories and the distinction between positive and negative terms, for instance, are subjective and depend on the personal judgement and life experiences of the authors of this paper. Moreover, by default, sites for older adults can be considered as ageist as they specifically target a group based on arbitrary characteristics, such as age. Hence, even positive qualities attributed to older adults should be viewed within the context of an arbitrary division based on age.

4.1. Conclusions

The study clearly demonstrates the ambivalence about older adults conveyed by most online dating sites for older adults. On the one hand, sites attempt to serve older adults, but on the other hand, they seem to be highly affected by common negative age stereotypes in society. As such, most sites convey both negative and positive messages about old age. These sites likely reflect current societal views of older adults, but may also shape older adults' views of themselves. Moreover, most sites are not uniquely tailored to current preferences and needs of older adults as reflected in the literature. Possibly, the sites "know better" what older adults really want, namely, love and marriage. Alternatively, the sites attempt to convey conservative messages about love and marriage as ultimate goals, even though these do not necessarily match the preferences of the majority of older adults.

Future research will benefit from interviewing web-designers and people who work in the advertising industry of online dating sites for older adults. Their perspective can complement the present findings. In addition, interviews with older adults to obtain their views on the way dating sites for older adults present old age, sexuality and dating are also desirable and likely will teach the industry about the most desired messages for this population. Finally, experimental research, which exposes older adults to different online messages, could provide much needed insights about the contribution of these sites to the construction of reality.

As a tool to portray reality but also to perpetuate and even strengthen ageist stereotypes in society, online dating sites have a great responsibility and power. The main message of the present paper is that it is almost impossible to use non-ageist language when it comes to dating sites for older adults. This is because when a dating site targets older adults, it explicitly declares that older and younger adults differ because of an arbitrary quality (e.g., chronological age). Increased awareness to ageist messages could potentially be a first step in targeting ageism. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the fact that age-neutral language is difficult to produce and is almost an oxymoron when the target group is characterized based on its chronological age. In addition to ageism, sexism and homophobia also were evident, calling attention to a need to create dating sites that cater to a wider and more diverse clientele in non-stereotypic ways.

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