



Sex after 60? You've got to be joking! Senior sexuality in comedy film



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ABSTRACT

Representations of the sexuality of older people have been largely absent in mainstream films until recent times. Cinema as an art form has historically denied or ignored the fact that humans are sexual beings their whole lives. In this paper critical discourse analysis is used to examine four comedy films released between 1993 and 2012 that tackle the subject of 'senior sexuality'. All four films are explicit in representing older people as sexual beings but, unlike films about young people's sexual activity, the details of sexual encounters are left to viewers' imaginations. Two of the films challenge the notion of a heteronormative old age.

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Introduction

The sexuality of older people has rarely been documented until relatively recent times. Even health professionals, who might be expected to have an understanding of each life stage because of their education and practice, have exhibited a lack of knowledge about the sexuality of older clients (Haesler, Bauer, & Fetherstonhaugh, 2016). The purpose of this paper is to explore mainstream cinematic representations of older people that show them to be sexual beings. The intention of such a study is to contribute to the body of knowledge about the ways popular culture presents aspects of ageing to the public.

Unusual and/or poor perceptions of the place of sexuality later in life have been documented sporadically for more than 30 years. A 1979 survey of health professionals' understanding of later-life sexuality produced a wide range of responses including 'difficult to imagine' and 'non-existent' as well as 'normal' and 'healthy' (Woods, 1979). This misunderstanding and confusion is tenacious and, as recently as 2006, similar misconceptions appear in research findings. For example, the Nottingham study of sexuality and ageing (Bouman, Arcelus, & Benbow, 2006) noted four myths about older people's sexuality, namely that a woman's sex life ends with menopause, that sex is for the young, that older people think they are too old to bother with sex, and that older people are asexual (p. 150). These myths contrast with research findings that confirm it is usual for humans to have an interest in sex and engage in sexual activity all of their adult lives (Gott & Hinchliff,

2003). A large US study of approximately 3000 participants demonstrated that being 'old' does not herald the end of sexual desires, interest or activity (Lindau et al., 2007). On the contrary, the authors found that a "majority of older adults are engaged in spousal or other intimate relationships and regard sexuality as an important part of life" (Lindau et al., 2007, p. 773).

Although adults remain interested in sexual intimacy even in their 80s and 90s, Western culture has been lulled into thinking that older people are asexual. Research has shown that it is often young people who are most likely to believe this to be true (LaTorre & Kear, 1977; Waterman, 2012). The poet and author May Sarton observed that "old age is not interesting until one gets there. It's a foreign country with an unknown language to the young and even to the middle-aged" (Sarton, 1973). The foreignness of old age, except to the old themselves, means there is often a lack of knowledge about the capacities, needs, and desires of older people. Myths and pre-conceptions have filled the knowledge vacuum and have been fed by the stereotypes and humorous representations offered by film and TV. Older people themselves might have contributed to the lack of understanding about their sexuality but, when the subject causes others to be incredulous, amused or disgusted, a discrete silence is often used to veil shame and embarrassment (Bouman et al., 2006). One recent study summarised it thus, "These types of ageist sexual attitudes pervade our society so intensely that many older adults see themselves as sexless, asexual, or too old for sexual activity, which can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Brown & Clark-Shirley, 2012, p. 207).

The sexuality of older people is often ignored or marginalised in entertainment media, and has been branded as 'unwatchable' (Walz, 2002). In comedy films the sexuality of older characters, if featured at

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all, is often treated as comical, particularly when older women are involved. Ageist stereotyping of older people in the media has, over time, created myths about ageing and later life sexuality. When the film industry perpetuates the stereotype of ageing as being asexual it does “a great disservice to the general public, young and old alike” (Bouman et al., 2006, p. 150) because for the young, old age has yet another dreadful aspect - celibacy - and for the old, their sexuality and need for intimacy is seen to be risible and an aberration.

The media has created further marginalisation for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT), elders by casting old age as heteronormative (Chivers, 2011). For an older generation who kept their sexual orientation ‘in the closet’ because of fear of persecution and, possibly, prosecution, there is the added insult of invisibility on-screen despite recent hard-won rights. There is evidence that though LGBT people in late middle-age consider that their old age will not be troubled with homophobic attitudes, older LGBT people requiring care can experience a lack of understanding of their sexuality (Barrett, Harrison, & Kent, 2009; Hughes, 2010; Tolley & Ranzijn, 2006).

Foucault’s work on the discursive nature of sexuality positions it as being a repressed topic. Foucault argues that this repression stimulates discussion because if sexuality is held as being scandalous or reprehensible in some way sexuality becomes an object of knowledge rather than a natural function. Therefore, the power driving the discourse of sexuality does not arise solely from repression but also lies in the regulation of when and how sexuality can be discussed (Foucault, 1976). Thus when academic research show that older people are sexual beings, other agents such as bio-medical commercial enterprises seize the opportunity to promote the idea of sexy seniors to their own financial advantage (Sandberg, 2015). The use of substances such as viagra is promoted and yet another picture of ageing is painted. Sexless or sexy? There seems to be no middle ground.

The authors of this paper examined ‘senior sexuality’ in four comedy films using critical discourse analysis. The focus was on older people in film to ascertain if they are represented as sexless, sexy, or in a different space altogether. The genre of comedy was chosen because humour can be a vehicle for the transmission of ideas that may be unacceptable in any other format. It is generally accepted that there are three main theories on the nature of humour: superiority, incongruity, and relief (Crichtley, 2002; Morreall, 1983). Briefly, superiority theory proposes that we laugh because we feel we are better in some way to the object of our laughter. Laughing at particular nationalities comes into this category. Incongruity makes us laugh because of the unexpected nature of what we see or hear. Crichtley (2002) gives the example of this gag ‘Did you see me at Princess Diana’s funeral? I was the one that started the Mexican wave’ (p. 3). Relief theory finds that audiences experience a wave of relief when humorous attention is drawn to a topic that is usually suppressed due to societal mores. Laughter ensues as pent up energy bursts forth. Repressed topics include sex, violence and death. Old people unexpectedly turning out to be sexual beings fulfils the criteria for all three theories of humour.

The tools of trade for creators of comedy material are irony, parody and satire. These are the instruments that can undermine political or religious institutions for anarchic, subversive, or disruptive purposes. Almost ‘anything goes’ in comedy film because almost anything can be justified or expressed if it is ‘only a joke’. It is under the guise of humour, however, that stereotypes gain acceptance.

A recent systematic review of research on knowledge about and attitudes to older people’s sexuality (Haesler et al., 2016) found that the more health care workers found out about sexuality in ageing, the more accepting they became. The latest figures published by Screen Australia show that 68% of the Australian population watch a movie in a cinema an average of almost seven times a year (Audiovisual Markets: Audiences, 2016). Box office figures show that the most popular genre of film is comedy (Nash Information Services, 2012). This suggests that when comedy films depict older adult sexuality they are influencing the knowledge and attitudes of large numbers of viewers.

For this reason the authors consider that comedy films merit scrutiny for how senior sexuality is portrayed.

Methodology

The chosen methodology was critical discourse analysis (CDA) using the specific approach of dispositive analysis. All forms of CDA have the same objective – to expose the links between language, power and ideology behind texts (Fairclough, 1992). CDA researchers hold the view that language both shapes society and is shaped by society (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Ideas put forward in texts that are designed to influence opinion can tap into pre-existing fears and prejudices, and gain acceptance without difficulty. This acceptance feeds the production of further texts promoting a similar theme. The same processes are at work in the dissemination of ideas via the medium of film. Societal beliefs, fears and prejudices are pandered to in comedy films specifically, because of the comic use of stereotyping.

Dispositive analysis (DA) is an approach of CDA that is well-suited to the analysis of discourse in the medium of film. DA allows a researcher to examine a discourse via the triangular relationship between the linguistic (what can be said and written), materialisations or objects related to the discourse, and actions related to the discourse (Caborn, 2007; Jäger & Maier, 2009). For example, in a comedy film, what is said about or by an older character can be linked to objects that are stereotypically associated with ageing, such as incontinence pads, and actions such as frequent trips to urinate. The three elements combine to provide an impression of ageing that is both visual and aural. When the researcher describes in words the visual and kinetic elements, these elements are converted to written text. The authors have found DA to be a useful tool for looking at other aspects of ageing in comedy film, including how middle age is represented (Gatling, Mills, & Lindsay, 2014).

Method

This study emerged from a larger doctoral thesis around the theme of representations of age and ageing in comedy film (Gatling, 2013). During the analysis of data for the wider study it became apparent that sexuality of older people, as portrayed on screen, had not been examined widely. Initially the IMDb database of popular comedy films was searched to determine which films could meet the thesis criteria – that the film is a comedy, popular, has themes of age and ageing and is in English. Popularity was determined by being listed in the top 1500 comedy films as determined by IMDb’s own criteria of box office takings and DVD rentals. The large search area was deemed necessary in order to find comedy films relevant to the specific topic. A list of search words and phrases was developed to include a range of commonly used descriptors for older people and the ageing process such as ‘elderly’, ‘ageing’, ‘grandma/pa’ and ‘past his/her prime’. The resultant list consisted of approximately 100 films which appeared to have a focus on ageing. The trailers for the 100 films were viewed and mapped against the list of stereotypes of ageing identified and agreed by previous researchers (see Table 1) and a matrix was developed.

During this process it became apparent that although ‘sexless’ was identified as a stereotype, there were a number of films which portrayed older characters as being ‘sexual’. Therefore, this descriptor

Table 1
Stereotypes of ageing (Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994).

Existing stereotype	Qualities
John Wayne conservative	Patriotic, nostalgic, religious, tough, proud, wealthy
Perfect grandfather	Intelligent, kind, loving, family orientated
Golden ager	Active, adventurous, healthy, well-travelled
Shrew curmudgeon	Greedy, complaining, inflexible, nosy
Despondent	Lonely, neglected, sad, tired, fragile
Recluse	Quiet, timid, dependent, forgetful
Severely impaired	Sexless, sick, feeble

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