

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE EUROPEAN MEDIA

Exploring Different Contexts
Through Conceptualisations of Age

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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Media are a key site for the construction, negotiation and opposition of gender, sexual identities and performances at a social and cultural level (Krijnen & Van Bauwel 2015, Ross 2011). In this respect, the relationship between gender, sexuality and the media has been studied from different theoretical and research perspectives, including the areas of anthropology, psychoanalysis and feminist and cultural studies. Media studies scholars, drawing on diverse epistemological and methodological approaches to gender and sexuality, have offered insights into a wide range of topics related to media representation, audiences and production. For example, there is a significant body of scholarly work on the presence and portrayal of women and sexual minorities in various types of media content and workplaces (Edström 2018, De Vuyst 2020, Krainitzki 2016, Lemish & Mulbauer 2012, Montiel 2014, Ross & Padovani 2017), on the engagement of audiences with mediated sexual content (e.g. Chronaki 2013, Scarcelli 2015, Smith, Attwood & Barker 2015) and the articulation of sexual identities through the use of media (e.g. Andreassen, Petersen, Harrison & Raun 2018). The *Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media* edited by Karen Ross (2011) can be seen as exemplary of this research tradition and brings together studies on gender, sex, sexualities and the media. This collection provides a rich set of chapters about different ways in which gender is performed in media contexts across the globe and focuses on diverse expressions of sexuality in media reception, production and representation.

While previous academic work has elaborated extensively on gender, media and sexuality, looking closely at either gender and media or sexuality and media, an emerging gap concerns the more systematic collection of research that approaches these interactions from the perspective of age. We believe that age and ageing must be taken into account since they are inherent elements that play a mediating role in how gender and sexuality are shaped and media messages are constructed, produced and interpreted by audiences. For example, studies have shown that older

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women tend to be invisible in popular media content and represented in a way that confirms rigid ideas about gender, sexuality and ageist assumptions (Dolan & Ticknell 2012, Montemurro & Chewning 2018, Tortajada, Dhaenens & Willem 2018). Just like gender and sexuality, age and ageing are not static, fixed categories but rather social and cultural constructions that are constantly changing and being renegotiated at both the level of public discourse and the level of individual perceptions (Krekula, Nikanda & Wilińska 2018, Sandberg 2008).

The aim of this edited volume is to explore how engagements with the media reflect people's constructions and understandings of gender in society, how age is articulated in relation to gender and sexuality and how negotiations of gender and sexuality inform people's media practices. This book offers original empirical and theoretical insights into the complex relationship between age, gender, sexualities and the media. In doing so, it showcases new and innovative research that is at the forefront of media and communication practice and theory. This collection covers a diverse array of topics such as gender performances in different media and contexts, sexuality and gender representations in digital and traditional media, expressions of age in relation to pornography and the portrayal and perception of gendered and ageing bodies on screen. The chapters explore, on the one hand, aspects of the changing social and sexual landscape; and on the other hand, how media construct gender and age through censorious or polarised perspectives. Our underlying goal is to inform academic, public and policy agendas by uncovering the subtle ways in which gender, age and sexuality can reinforce or weaken each other as systems of privilege and oppression in the media.

Since this publication is situated at the intersection between cultural studies, gender studies, feminist media studies and sexuality studies, it moves beyond an understanding of gender and sexuality within the man/woman bipolar. Instead, it considers the social, historical and cultural trajectories running through the relationship between gender, sexuality and age. In order to explore gender, sexuality and age as social and cultural constructions, we draw on the concept of intersectionality that identifies a mode of analysis integral to feminist, gender and sexuality studies based on the idea that ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age and other identity markers are mutually constitutive (Crenshaw 1991, Lykke 2010). We believe that it is of utmost importance to understand how the notion of age defines and redefines the connection between gender and sexuality to offer a full understanding of how dynamics of difference and sameness shape media landscapes.

In line with the cultural studies perspective, the contributions in this edited volume take into account the complex interactions between media representation, reception and production in processes of meaning-making (Buckingham 2008, Livingstone 1998). This means that the chapters not only represent a wide variety of studies on different types of media texts and genres (television, cinema, digital spaces), but also include the voices of media producers and audiences to gain insights into how media messages are socially constructed and interpreted. It is important to note that our understanding of how people in different age groups and parts of Europe perform, understand and consume media, especially in relation

to gender and sexuality, is continuously changing with the proliferation of online media (Attwood 2012). That is why the chapters focus on the more traditional media forms as well as take into account the complexity of the transmedial, convergent and participatory nature of popular culture and media today.

Finally, it is essential to note that the book highlights the potential of media to both reinforce as well as challenge systems of oppression and social hierarchies based on differences of gender, sexual orientation and age. This is why we explore the nuances of contemporary sex and gender scripts across different ages by looking both at normative interpretations of gender and sexuality and those that challenge and move beyond the heteronormative and homonormative, fixed categories of gender and stereotypical accounts of age and ageing.

Contents of the edited volume

The added value of this volume can be derived both from the choice of topics and authors. The contributions have been selected to reflect a wide range of case studies in various national contexts. The authors of the chapters are working in different countries such as Italy, Greece, Spain, Ireland, Albania, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Finland, Portugal, Argentina and Belgium. They present different theoretical and analytical perspectives on gender, sexuality and age. The combination of research that covers different national and cultural contexts as well as academic cultures that spread across Europe is one of the most important contributions of this book to current debates on age, gender and sexuality. Considering that previous collections on the topic of gender and media mostly include work from specific national contexts or different parts of the world (e.g. Ross 2011), we believe that a strong focus on the European dimension within the contributors' discussions is necessary to explore the specificities of the European context. This also allows for a comparative perspective that can offer new insights into similarities and differences between European countries.

Furthermore, by bringing together scholars working on gender, sexuality, age and media across Europe, this edited volume links up with the rationale of the ECREA book series to create a space for media and communication research focusing on Europe and stimulate collaborations among researchers. In addition to geographical diversity, we have strived for diversity among the authors in terms of age and academic positions. The collection brings together research from early-career and established scholars who engage in an interesting epistemological dialogue with each other about gender, sexuality and age in people's practices with the media.

Last but not least, the edited volume builds bridges between different ECREA sections. Through the cross-sectional collaboration between the Gender and Communication and the Film Studies section, it was possible to embrace more epistemological approaches on the topic and contribute further to creating shared spaces for cross-sectional academic dialogues. This objective is also reflected in the composition of the list of authors who come from a wide range of ECREA

sections and working groups such as Gender and Communication, Film Studies, Children, Youth and Media, Digital Culture, and Audience and Reception Studies. As a result, the contributions reflect a diversity in theoretical perspectives related to the fields of feminist media studies, post-structuralism, sociology, media and cultural studies, through which researchers explore the tropes, definitions, and understandings of age, gender, sex and sexuality that are played out in mainstream and digital media. The chapters employ a variety of methodological approaches and present a wide range of empirical cases such as qualitative interviews, textual analysis, surveys and multi-method research.

To connect all these chapters and angles, we have decided to choose a structure that is cross-cut by age, dividing the book into three Parts: children and young people, adults and adulthood, and elderly people. In this way, we want to ensure that voices from different generations are represented in the book, as well as their specific challenges and experiences in relation to media. Some of the chapters can be considered a hinge between different Parts in the edited volume because they make references that go beyond age groups. The chapter outline will be further discussed below.

Chapter outline

The book is structured as follows: it starts in Part I: Young People, Sexuality and Gender Performance: Texts and Audiences, with contributions that focus on young people. These chapters address the topic in relation to media texts (representation) and audiences (consumption).

More specifically, Iolanda Tortajada, Núria Araüna and Cilia Willem's chapter 'Feminist YouTubers in Spain: A public space for building resistance addresses gender and sexual violence in the context of feminist activism in Spain (Chapter 1). In light of the #MeToo campaigns at a national and global level, the authors process Spanish feminist YouTubers' contributions to the creation of a digital public space for resistance and solidarity. Their argumentation draws on the effectiveness of digital spaces as vehicles of political and social mobilisation, especially in matters related to gender and feminist politics.

Moving forward to issues of representation, Florian Vanlee's and Páraic Kerrigan's chapter 'Un/fit for young viewers: LGBT+ representation in Flemish and Irish children's television' comparatively explores youth television programming in public service broadcasting (PSB) in Ireland and Flanders (Chapter 2). It highlights the (in)visibility of queer sexualities in children's television. Their main argument draws on the fact that queer televisibility was not part of the programming in Ireland or Flanders until the 1990s. According to the authors, it is the increasingly globalised nature of children's television from the noughties onwards that led to a subsequent increase in LGBT+ televisibility in both countries. Their research provides a comparative account of the two media cultures, highlighting the different ways in which LGBT+ voices and representations made their appearance in the national television programmes. By acknowledging the cultural and social differences between the two

cases, the authors highlight the shared discursive ways in relation to sexual and gender diversity that are embedded in PSB children's programming.

In Chapter 3, 'Breaking the silence: Young people, sex information and the internet in Italy and Portugal', Daniel Cardoso and Cosimo Marco Scarcelli provide a comparative account of Italy and Portugal on the issue of adolescents' search for sex-related information online. By employing this approach to qualitative interviews about sex-related topics, they illustrate adolescents' shared discursive patterns in talking about learning or just being informed about sex through online sources. They want to establish a cross-cultural research dialogue addressing the complexity through which adolescents negotiate online information about sex, and thereby broaden the scope of research in cultural contexts that are still silencing issues of non-heteronormative sexualities. The significance of 'gender' in their analysis about adolescents' fears and expectations and their redefinitions of what constitutes information about sexual issues is remarkable.

In Chapter 4, 'COVID-19 pandemic and discourses of anxiety about childhood sexuality in digital spaces', Despina Chronaki discusses anxieties about children's sexuality in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her study is based on an illustrative sample of press news online across Europe with a focus on items discussing popular topics in relation to children and mediated sexual content amidst lockdowns. Topics such as children's experiences with pornography, zoombombing incidents, fears about online sexual abuse during quarantine and Pornhub's provision of premium accounts in COVID-19-affected areas are just a few of those regenerating heated policy, public and academic discussions about childhood regulation and anxieties of children's leisure. This chapter highlights how technologies of sexuality serve as platforms of regulation and self-regulation, especially in turbulent times.

The second Part of this edited volume, Adults, Sexuality, Gender and the Media in Research Perspective, includes chapters addressing adult sexualities and how those are performed and represented in popular contexts. In Chapter 5, 'HIV-related stigma in the European cinema: Conflictive representations of a cultural trauma', Sergio Villanueva Baselga conducts a textual analysis of popular films addressing issues of people living with HIV and shows how normative constructions of stigma still apply to representations of people living with HIV. By analysing the films *Drôle de Félix* (2000), *Pride* (2014), *Theo et Hugo dans le même bateau* (2016) and *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), Villanueva Baselga looks at how 1980s HIV discourses – defined and understood in terms of cultural trauma – still underpin such popular texts. The study indicates that UNAIDS 90–90–90 achievements in the diagnosis and treatment of HIV that have enhanced peoples' with HIV lifestyles have not been broadly embraced by film creators.

In Chapter 6, 'Build it and they will come: Sex toys, heteronormativity and age', Paul Nixon and Anja Selmer engage in a much-needed discussion on the socio-cultural construction of sex toys. They provide a critical account of how the sex toy market seems to be moving towards heteronormative formulations of the products, followed by an empirical approach to users' perceptions. By combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, the authors explore people's constructions of the sex

toy products and markets through perspectives of age, gender and sexual preferences. Their approach draws on the socio-historical development and perception of sex toys and is an excellent example of how important it is to approach sexual cultures from a cultural perspective.

Chapter 7, 'Fuelling hate: Hate speech towards women in online news websites in Albania', written by Emiljano Kaziaj, returns to the issue of representation by investigating the contested and increasingly popular topic of hate speech against women in four major Albanian online news websites. His discussion focuses on young adult women, 19–25 years old, who are a group targeted through hate speech practices in terms of gender and age. Kaziaj employs both qualitative and quantitative analytical strategies to map the discursive patterns through which women 19–25 are framed in online news media discourse in Albania. His policy-oriented work provides insights about how online media professionals could work towards less censorious – if not biased – media coverage of gender-related issues in the country.

Chapter 8, 'Tell me how old I am': Cinema, pedagogy, adults and underage trans folks', stays within issues related to representation. Magalí Daniela Pérez Riedel and Pablo Ariel Scharagrodsky examine the representations of transgender children in media across Europe and the USA in the *3 Generations* (2015), *They* (2017) and *Girl* (2018) films. Their discussion revolves around the scrutinisation of the young transgender body and identity from parents, relatives and doctors, as well as its ethical perception. Looking at the topic through how transgender minors experience their relationships with adults, the authors explore the cinematic representations of transgender youth through established adult notions of teenage life as a hormonal and social transition. Although discourses about how to 'correct' the non-acceptable body are reiterated in the films according to the authors' analysis, they argue that the films give room to broader discussions about the rights and needs of transgender minors in a context that fails to recognise their bodily integrity and personal autonomy.

The final Part of this edited volume addresses the topic of later-in-life sexualities. Most contributions in Part III, *Elderly have a Voice(?)*: Sexuality, Gender and the Media across Texts and Audiences, discuss issues of representation of elderly bodies and later-in-life sexuality in particular. In Chapter 9, 'Invisible aged femininities in popular culture: Representational strategies deconstructed', Sofie Van Bauwel explores the representation of ageing women in popular television fiction. She highlights the contradictory nature of ageing womanhood being mostly absent and ubiquitous at the same time by arguing that whenever present, ageing femininity is overstated and sometimes manifested excessively. By embracing approaches that discuss ageing in popular television in celebratory terms as well as those that are more critical towards industry's intentions in constructing the ageing body discursively, she uncovers representational strategies applied to ageing femininities in popular media content.

In Chapter 10, "'Old dirty pops and young hot chicks": Age differences in pornographic fantasies', Susanna Paasonen engages with Finnish audiences' preferences in pornography and discursive constructions of the ageing body. Her

analysis based on survey data explores female audiences' preferences and dislikes in pornography through the lens of age. She is particularly interested in investigating the ageing male body as an ambivalent, simultaneously attractive and repulsive pornographic fantasy figure. In exploring how discourses of control and submission come into play during porn consumption, Paasonen unpacks the ways in which ageing bodies signify excessiveness and authenticity. In the process, participants' negotiation of sexual fantasies also experiments with the appeal of older male bodies as sites of disgust and taboo transgression to be enjoyed from a distance.

In Chapter 11, 'Hustling and ageism in the films *Eastern Boys* and *Brüder der Nacht*', Antonio Caballero-Gálvez and María Porras Sánchez present the results of the analysis of two films, *Eastern Boys* (Robin Campillo, 2013) and *Brüder der Nacht* (Patric Chiha, 2016), to understand the discursive construction of gay prostitution. By drawing on critical approaches to the gay sexual body in terms of health/fitness and hyper-muscularity, they mainly focus on elderly gay bodies compared and contrasted with Eastern European male bodies as represented in the films analysed. By engaging with a psychoanalytic approach to the film narrative, the authors highlight the responsibility of gay media in the creation of an unreachable ideal of youth.

Karen Ross' chapter 'Ageing women on screen: Disgust, disdain and the *Time's Up* pushback' continues with the topic of representation and revisits feminist debates about women's invisibility in popular culture to provide an analytical account of the absence – or rare appearance – of older women in popular culture. Following a socio-historical approach to the topic, Ross explores the tropes of older womanhood as manifest across a range of popular mainstream media. In this process, she revisits established notions about ageing when it comes to gender, both when it comes to older women's representation and older women as audiences depicted in texts. The author concludes her discussion, considering what she calls 'a pushback' by industry agents (women actors and directors) who work towards putting older women at the centre of their narratives, thereby offering space for manifestations of the ageing female body in popular culture.

The last chapter of this Part, which is also the final contribution to this edited volume, 'No Country for Old Men: Representation of the ageing body in contemporary pornography' (Chapter 13) addresses ageing male bodies in pornography. Federico Zecca explores the discursive construction of the ageing body in pornography amidst the proliferation of digital technologies that have increased visibility of such representations. His study contributes to filling a gap in research, given the lack of analytical approaches to the ageing body in pornography. Based on textual analysis, Zecca offers a mapping of the available discourses about the ageing body in contemporary pornography. To do so, he draws on the socio-economic angle of the sex industry and an epistemic dynamic related to the formation of the pornographic subject. For his analysis, he combines ageing studies with media studies and unpacks the codes and conventions through which pornography (re)presents the ageing body.

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