

**Domesticated predators**  
**Gossip media's portrayal of celebrity cougars and their**  
**toyboys**

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## **Abstract**

Heterosexual relationships in which the woman is much older than her male partner have become increasingly visible in popular culture. Typically these women are referred to as cougars and their partners as toyboys. It is argued that these types of relationships have the potential to undermine traditional forms heteronormativity and intersectional gender/age performances. For women past their forties are not expected to engage in sexual relationships, especially not with younger men. Building on theories in gender studies on gender performance, heterosexual identities and intersectionality, this study discusses the discourse found in Dutch gossip media regarding the relationships of four pre-selected celebrity cougars, i.e. Patricia Paay, Demi Moore, Madonna, and Heleen van Royen. Articles that reported on relationship events and were published in the most central gossip media in the Netherlands were sampled ( $N=138$ ). A qualitative content analysis revealed that these women were depicted as independent and empowered, whereas the male partners were portrayed as dependent on their older female partners. This challenges the traditional understandings of heteronormativity, albeit a power imbalance remains intact. The second main finding concerns that gossip media describe cougars and toyboys in terms of acts that are congruent with general understandings of intersectional performances of gender/age, i.e. a wise, caring, decent-looking mother, with a handsome, boyish, adventurous partner. Overall, the media did not describe these relationships in terms of deviance. It is argued that has to do mainly with the relation between the two main findings: while gossip media describe cougars in terms of how they dominate over their male partner and thereby challenge certain aspects of heteronormativity, other aspects are more compatible with the seemingly natural beliefs of doing gender/age within the framework of heterosexual relationships. Thus in theoretical terms, denaturalizing the “natural” does not necessarily trigger criticism, as long as practices that supposedly challenge heteronormativity occur alongside certain gender/age performances that reproduce heteronormative frameworks.

**Keywords:** Cougars and Toyboys, Heteronormativity, Performativity, Intersectionality, Gossip Media

## 1. Introduction

The presence of cougars, “women who are 40 years old and older who date younger men” (Ames & Burcon, 2011, p. 78), in popular culture has become increasingly normalized over time. In the 60’s movie *The Graduate*, Ms. Robinson set the tone and was one of the best-known fictional cougars of all time. More recently, characters like the middle-aged Samantha in *Sex and the City* (who has sexual encounters with men of different age groups), Deidre Barlow in *Coronation Street* (who had a relationship with the much younger Samir Rachid), Courtney Cox in the sitcom *Cougar Town*, and the older female protagonists in Hollywood movies like *I Could Never Be Your Woman* or *The Rebound*, put cougars on the map. Hence, the sexuality of women past their midlife is visible in popular culture. This visibility of fictional cougars in popular culture, Kaklamanidou (2012) even speaks of a “cougar mania” that started since the 2000’s, might suggest that older woman-younger man relationships have become acceptable in contemporary society. But is that really the case? What does it mean to be a cougar in this day and age? To address this issue, this study will focus on popular discourse about cougars expressed in celebrity media.

The assumption is that romantic relationships cougars are involved in, have the potential to undermine the dominant notion older women being a-sexual. After all, a cougar is a woman that is not afraid to have romantic and sexual involvements with (younger) men. In addition, the cougar undermines the dominant notion of femininity as passive. According to Ames and Burcon (2011), the term cougar identifies the older woman as a predator, i.e. a sexually aggressive beast that hunts defenseless younger men. This metaphor refers to two elements: the predator (older woman) and the prey (younger man). If older women are seen as sexual predators that are on the hunt to catch their prey, they are not seen as passive older women that do not have an interest in maintaining an active sex life. In other words, cougars have sexual agency. So, framing the cougar as a predator could indeed possibly challenge the idea of a non-sexual woman past her midlife. Additionally, framing younger men as passive prey that surrender to the needs of the predator suggests that heteronormative roles are challenged. After all, the concept “cougar” emphasizes the passivity of men and the dominance of women in this type of relationship.

To sum up, the cougar is increasingly visible, and has the potential to unsettle established ways of thinking about ageing women, gender, and sexual relations. So

from an academic perspective, it is therefore interesting to study *how* these cougars are evaluated since this phenomenon has the potential to challenge 1) the notion of an a-sexual ageing woman and 2) heteronormative roles. From a societal point of view, this research could contribute to the understanding of how gender and sexuality are not necessarily tied to rigid or uniform norms.

In the present paper, the focus is on the discourse that surrounds celebrity cougars. On a general level, celebrities are persona around which moral viewpoints can be evaluated. As Butler Breese (2010, p.338) argues: “Moral boundaries and expectations of the collective are narrated and negotiated by interpreting and judging the actions of celebrities as portrayed in the media”. This implies that evaluation of celebrities’ behavior happens in a two-step flow: 1) the news items on celebrities are narrated, and so, a framework is offered in which 2) the audience is able to interpret and judge the behavior of celebrities within this framework. As a result, Gorin and Dubien (2011) stress the importance of studying what narrative is provided to the audience. Writing specifically about celebrity news, they state that: “A deeper analysis of these stories can therefore provide a meaningful interpretation of more general, transactional and trans-situational values which appear through the portrayal of celebrities and their negotiations” (p. 600). Celebrity news is in this viewpoint seen as something that captures points of moral references. Thus celebrity news is suitable for understanding what type of discourse is presented to audiences about cougars and is therefore selected as the object of analysis for this present study. Bearing all this in mind, the guiding research question for this paper is: How are gender, age, and sexual identity of celebrity cougars constructed in gossip media? How this news is sampled, and other methodological considerations are explained later. For now, it is discussed what has already been researched on cougars.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

There may have always been Mrs. Robinson’s, but it was not until the 2000’s that the description of older woman-younger man relationships with the label “cougar” was popularized in everyday language (Kaklimanidou, 2012). It is therefore unsurprising that few articles have been published on cougars in feminist studies or the field of sociology of love thus far, yet some previous research was conducted on “age-discrepant” relationships. Studies on age-discrepancy do not necessarily focus on older women-younger men relationships, as age-discrepancy also concerns older men-

younger women relationships and typically, these studies measure the degree of “sustainability” or “relationship potential” (e.g. Boyd & Li, 2003; Zak et al., 2001; Cowan, 1984). These studies therefore do not exactly relate to the research interests of this present study. However recently, academic literature on media representation started to develop initial thoughts on cougars. Cougars as a relatively new terminology, together with the increased visibility in popular culture, seem to have triggered the academic community to start to empirically study this matter, as most studies on cougars date from the 2000’s onwards and concerned the representation of cougars and/or their toyboys in mass media (e.g. Kaklamanidou, 2012; Weitz, 2010; Hamid-Turksoy, Van Zoonen, & Kuipers, 2014). So, what have these scholars written about the representation of older woman-younger man relationships?

The romantic relationships that cougars have in Hollywood movies are represented as troublesome according to Kaklamanidou (2012) and Weitz (2010). Both these studies show that relationships between an older woman and a younger man are difficult to maintain and most often, it leaves the cougar “drunk, unhappy or both” (Weitz, 2010, p. 28). Also, both Kaklamanidou (2012) and Weitz (2010) mention that after these cinematic break-ups, it is likely that each partner “returns home” by finding love with a more “age-appropriate” significant other. Hollywood movies therefore represent relationships between cougars and their partners as some kind of sexual exploration before ending up with a more “mature” relationship.

Concerning television, Kaklamanidou (2012) went in-depth with her analysis on the sitcom *Cougar Town*. According to her, the show changed its focus throughout the first season. The first half of the first season had episodes that evolved mainly around the romantic encounters of Jules Cobb, a divorced woman with a teenage son, but later on, the show shifted its focus to the life of a middle-aged woman in general (e.g. career, motherhood, friendship etc.). Nevertheless, what remained constant throughout the show is how Jules and her best friend Ellie try their best to avoid their bodies from showing signs of ageing. According to Kaklamanidou (2012) this is one of the key characteristics associated with cougars: “Even though *Cougar Town* did not live up to the promise of its title, the fictional Jules did share some of the main characteristics common in contemporary representations of the cougar, such as a fixation with her age and figure” (p.84). This focus on the cougar’s body is not only a theme within fictional popular culture, but it seems to be a recurring issue that ageing female celebrities are faced with in their representation in gossip media.

In gossip media, the bodies and faces of ageing female celebrities tend to be checked for signs of ageing and cosmetic surgery (Fairclough, 2012). Kaklamanidou (2012) also recognizes how important the ageing female body is to gossip media by stating that celebrity cougars “endure relentless scrutiny over their possible ‘enhancement’ procedures, expect ridicule if they gain a pound or take an unflattering picture and *face criticism for their choice of partner*” (p. 86). Celebrity cougars are also evaluated in terms of their physical appearances. For instance, Hamid-Turksoy et al. (2014) mention how UK soap opera actress Cheryl Fergison married a much younger Moroccan man. She does not live up to Western ideal beauty standards as she is overweight, which made British tabloids start to question whether her relationship was “true love” or whether her partner was after her economic success. Not only was her beauty a reference point in the ways in which tabloids evaluated her relationship, also the ethnicity of her younger lover is deemed relevant.

Besides physical appeal, another aspect of the representation of the ageing female body concerns reproductive organs. As DeMeulenaere Weedon (2013) argues: “Cougars may be mothers but they are definitely not mothers-to-be. The cougar discourse, such as I can discern it, constructs us as women who no longer have a desire for procreation even though we are probably still fertile. Hence, we are sexual but not procreative subjects” (p. 59). The author therefore puts emphasis on the sexual aspect of cougars: cougars are seen as objects of desire. How, then, do gossip media discuss (the absence of) motherhood? After all, gossip media tend to cover a lot of stories on celebrity motherhood (Hopper & Aubrey, 2011; Jermyn, 2008; Van Zoonen, 1998). Motherhood and physical appearance are therefore two key themes that will inform the research design and analysis in this paper.

Furthermore, this study of Hamid-Turksoy et al. (2014) also found that the ethnicity of the toyboy matters. Results showed that British tabloids described these relationships of ordinary middle-aged British women with much younger exotic Turkish toyboys as exploitive, as he would supposedly be after her British passport and economic prosperity. The sentiment found in these newspapers on the relationships of older woman with younger foreign men was therefore rather skeptical and disapproving. Even when such a relationship was described as a happy couple, there was still an imbalance found in the representation of the dyad: he was an object of her desires. Therefore, the authors conclude that a post-colonial discourse informs cougar representations in these British tabloids, because the evaluation of this

relationship was not only based on the physical appearance and appeal of the cougar, but also the ethnicity of her “toyboy”. These outcomes suggest that cougar relationships are judged on the basis of the intersection of age, gender, and possibly other identities such as ethnicity. As a result, an intersectional approach is needed in order to understand how cougars and their relationships are discussed in gossip media. In the following sections, the core theoretical concepts of this study, i.e. gender, heteronormativity, and intersectionality will be discussed.

## 2.1 Gender

Gender theory, as developed particularly by postmodern feminists like Judith Butler, clarifies that what people believe to be masculine or feminine is the result of everyday performances that are reproduced by oneself and others over and over again. Common ideas about femininities and masculinities rest on a cultural legacy of countless everyday mundane (inter)actions, while simultaneously these mental schemata are constantly reproduced as people go through life acting as a “woman” or a “man” on a daily basis (Butler, 1990). Simple acts such as riding a woman’s bike everyday to work, or shaving one’s armpit regularly, accumulate and reinforce general notion of what counts as femininities. The same goes for masculinities: what it means to be a man is redefined everyday by numerous performances such as walking around shirtless on a hot summer day, or using a urinal in the men’s restroom – i.e. peeing whilst standing (masculine) instead of sitting (feminine). It is these micro acts that express gender over and over again up to a point that these rituals are experienced as natural. Indeed, when riding a woman’s bike to work, i.e. not a man’s bike, women probably do not consciously tell themselves that this act (re)defines them as women. It is rather perceived as “normal”. These gendered performances have become so common, that they are not associated with femininities or masculinities per se while performing the act.

Butler (1990) furthermore argues that gendered performances rely on the legacy of the repetition of acts. In this viewpoint, people do not have an essential, unified, and truthful gendered identity. As Butler (1990, p. 179) phrases it: “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane



way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” This quote therefore illustrates that performances do not happen as a result of this authentic true self that needs to express and/or satisfy its inherent needs, but rather that gender is understood in terms of the exposure to repetition of acts that are associated with gender, through which gender identity becomes internalized and appears as essential to the self.

Sometimes, acts are not congruent with the status quo. When this happens, gender becomes denaturalized to a certain extent: “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a ‘ground’ will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration, indeed, a gendered corporealization of time. The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional *discontinuity*, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this ‘ground.’” (Butler, 1990, p.179). This quote illustrates, that although performances of gender seem so natural and true, gender becomes denaturalized in the act when people are able to fail to repeat acts in accordance with gendered roles.

Hence, when people act outside the norm, the constructedness of gender becomes apparent. Butler (1990) stresses the importance of parodies on gendered acts, such as drag queens. These people are not viewed as women in a biological sense, but they are able to act and copy as what we consider as female behavior. The act of drag therefore detaches what is considered as natural sex and seemingly natural acts of gender from one another, since the natural sex of drag performers (male) is not congruent with the way their natural sex is supposed to be performed (not feminine). Therefore, continuing in Butler’s (1990) line of reasoning, it could be argued that cougars denaturalize the intersectional performance of gender and the performance of age. For old women are expected to act their age and gender in a certain way, and the intersection of these two components, i.e. old and woman, are not associated with sexual relationships, and especially not with younger men (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2006).

## **2.2 Heteronormativity**

Heterosexuality is more than merely a form of sexuality. Some forms of sexuality are generally favored over others (heterosexuality over homosexuality), just as with

gender (masculine over feminine) according to Schilt and Westbrook (2009). It is a dominant form of sexuality that relies on the subordination of other sexualities for its dominance. The argument goes that this marginalization of homosexuality occurs because it is associated with femininity (Connell, 2005; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Continuing in this line of reasoning, heterosexuality implies some sort of gender order: homosexuality is considered deviant since men are supposed to dominate over women but not over men. So, heterosexuality also refers to norms that stretch outside of the sexual arena, as gender gets regulated. The gender roles that men and women perform in these relationships are based on heterosexist norms that refer to domestic and extra-domestic spheres (Jackson, 2006). In other words, heterosexuality has hierarchal characteristics in which heterosexual norms set the standard for how gender must be performed within as well as outside relationships – i.e. heteronormativity.

One of such norms, and which is most commonly found in contemporary society is that men in heterosexual relationships are usually a couple of years older than women. What does it mean if the roles are reversed? In their study on age reporting in gossip media, Thomas and Holderman (2007) found that there are more celebrity couples in which the man is somewhat older than the woman. Age was rarely an element of the story when discussing such celebrity relationships, but when celebrity couples were discussed in which the female was older than the male, it automatically became an issue of discussion. This means that it gets noticed when the roles within heterosexual relationships are reversed. This could be related back to the argument of Butler (1990) that acts only get noticed once they are incongruent with a legacy of established performances. One could experience older woman-younger man relationships as deviant, as such relationships are not the norm.

There is another reason to think that cougars are able to challenge heteronormativity. Cougars have the connotation of a predator, according to Ames and Burcon (2011). This analogy refers to the woman as the hunter and the man as the prey. The norms of a traditional heterosexual relationship therefore become reversed: the woman is regarded being dominant over the man. In this way, taken for granted acts and norms within heterosexual relationships could be challenged. Possibly old woman-younger man relationships could therefore trigger criticism, as this type of relationship is simply not common or in accordance with the norms of heterosexuality and the gendered acts that come along with it.

### 2.3 Intersectionality

So, the relationships that cougars have with their significant other could be possibly challenge established notions on heteronormativity, as relationships between older women-younger men are not common and because the analogy of a cougar implies some sort of reversed power imbalance. Yet, another aspect that might influence in the ways in which gossip media discuss the relationships of old female celebrities and their younger partners, has to do with the intersection of two components: age and gender. Just like gender rests on a legacy of mundane performances, so does age. The intersection of multiple identities, is referred to as intersectionality (Davis, 2011). So, when understanding the performances of cougars, one needs to understand how specifically gender and age intersect. Older women are not expected to have a sexual identity, as sexuality is more associated with youth (Carpenter et al., 2006). Hence, the cougar phenomenon has the potential to undermine the notion of an a-sexual woman in her midlife.

Initially, Crenshaw (1989) wrote about intersectionality when reflecting on the different viewpoints of emancipation that exists among black women and white women. For instance, black women have a history of working outside a domestic context, whereas this is not the case for white (middle class) women. This has implications for how nowadays black and white women experience working outside their homes. However, there is still some dispute about the number of social divisions that could be included in intersectional analyses, as mentioned by Yuval-Davis (2011) – i.e. could we speak of the intersection of gender, class, race, “*etc*”?

Interestingly, Hamid-Turksoy et al. (2014) take physical appearance as one of the factors that intersects with gender, age, nation and class in the ways in which older woman-younger man relationships are discussed. While beauty and the body of the female cougar in general are certainly factors that should be included in analyses on cougars, it is disputable in feminist literature what exactly are legitimate elements for intersectional research. Most often, it refers to gender, class and ethnicity (Davis, 2011), but can these categories alone capture the complexity of the social world? After all, social identities are not defined in terms of the intersection of these three categories alone. On the other hand, expanding intersectional research to all kinds of social categories might suggest that intersectional research is like a black box in which every social category could be put in.

Yuval-Davis (2011) is not in favor of prioritizing some categories over others in feminist literature. According to her, scholars should be sensitive to how some categories are in certain situations more salient than others and therefore ethnicity, class, and gender should not always be at the center of intersectional research. Nevertheless, researchers should bear in mind that focusing too much on particular contexts could prevent the comparability of findings. Villa (2011) argues that by focusing too much on intersections of specific categories, a lot of nuance gets lost. She suggests the importance of embodiment, as talking about intersectionality never captures the lived experience of intersections. This present paper therefore also acknowledges that in order to understand how cougars are perceived on gossip media, it is necessary to focus, first, on the categories that intersect that are most relevant for this topic, which are in this case: gender, and age. However, since the existing literature shows how discourses of the body and motherhood are important as well in the representations of cougars, these too will be included in the analyses.

#### **2.4 Gossip media**

We thus expect popular discourse on celebrity cougars to articulate gender, sexuality and age, and include references to motherhood and body. Gossip media are suitable for analyzing the popular discourse on celebrity cougars because, first of all, their primary product is to deliver an outlet in which the lives of celebrities are documented and narrated. Celebrities are essentially constructs of mass media (Van Zoonen, 2006) and in order to maintain their stardom, they need an outlet that gets them in the public's eye (Meyers, 2009). Gossip media, in return, thrive on capturing and discussing celebrities' life events (Meyers, 2009). Thus, celebrities and gossip media are mutually dependent of each other. Gossip media are therefore likely to report and elaborate on the life events of celebrity cougars, as they prosper economically from selling those stories, and celebrity cougars need gossip media to report on their life events to maintain their stardom. Therefore, gossip media are regarded as appropriate channels to find information on celebrity cougars and their toyboys.

Not only are gossip media fruitful sources in a pragmatic sense, as they are most likely to report extensively on the relationship events of celebrity cougars, also from a theoretical perspective an analysis on their content could elicit popular notions on gender identity. For gossip media are believed to provide audiences with moral judgments on celebrity life events that are congruent with popular wisdom, and will

probably not shift their focus. Gossip media have an immense audience reach and would therefore appeal to those widespread popular beliefs (Van Zoonen, 1998). The overall sentiment in their news items cannot not deviate too much from what the general understandings are of the greater public, yet this does not mean that it is easy to pin-down a cohesive moral judgment.

Also, there are differences between certain mediated gossip outlets. Dutch gossip media tend to be rather mild in comparison to for instance the British gossip industry. As Hamid-Turksoy et al. (2014) mention, everything that falls outside a patriarchal ideology, is considered deviant, including homosexuality, virginity and toyboys in British tabloids. Dutch gossip media on the other hand tend to treat homosexual relationship break-ups in a similar fashion as heterosexual heartbreak (Van Zoonen, 1998). Their judgments are based contextual evaluations rather than applying general notions in accordance with patriarchy on what is deemed as (in)appropriate behavior. Nevertheless, that does not automatically result in an unproblematic representation of gender and sexuality in Dutch gossip media. Gender always plays a role in the moral evaluation of gossip news, and its moral evaluation tends to present arguments that are congruent with popular wisdom (Van Zoonen, 1998). Therefore, it is deemed relevant to study the discourse constructed on cougars in Dutch gossip media.

Finally, not only are the gossip items embedded in moral evaluations, they present their audiences frameworks in which they can interpret these evaluations in. Audiences could be seen as active agents that can interpret media content in accordance with their own frame of reference (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). While audiences have a certain amount of agency in how they consume and make sense of gossip media, Tyler and Bennett (2010) argue that it needs to be understood what framework is presented to the audiences in the first place, since their interpretation happens within these restricted boundaries. The content of these media are therefore part of how audiences make sense of, for instance, celebrity cougars. In short, not only are moral evaluations embedded in these gossip items, they are also used by audiences to understand their own social life. Hermes (1995) even argues that by consuming gossip media, audiences experience a sense of community. There are two different ways in which this community takes shape: by either consuming gossip media and imagining a community by doing so, or by simply discussing these events with other people who are physically present. In other words, gossip media are tools

for audiences to be engaged with larger societal issues about what could (not) be considered moral and ethical behavior.

In a nutshell, it is argued that gossip media are suitable outlets to study to understand the popular discourse on celebrity cougars and toyboys for three reasons: 1) compared with other outlets, they are most likely to elaborate extensively on the life events of celebrity cougars 2) they embed moral evaluations in their messages in accordance with popular beliefs 3) the gossip items provide audiences with an evaluative framework.

### 3. Method

To capture *how* issues of gender, age, and sexual identity are constructed in gossip media in relation to cougars and their toyboys, a qualitative content analysis is employed in this study. This method allows the researcher to understand meanings embedded in these documents with an open, inductive perception. Different news stories on pre-selected cougars were sampled ( $N=138$ ) from the most central gossip media in the Netherlands. The sampling procedure essentially covers three aspects: 1) a selection of media outlets 2) a selection of cougars and 3) a selection of news items. Yet, what all these stages of sampling have in common is that each sampling unit is sampled with a certain purpose in mind – i.e. purposeful sampling. First of all, the media outlets were selected on the basis of their centrality in the Netherlands. For instance news on a particular event that appeared in one the largest gossip magazines, which in the Netherlands are *Story*, *Prive* and *Weekend*, were suitable for this research. Also the gossip pages of the online website of *Algemeen Dagblad* and *De Telegraaf* were useful. Concerning audiovisual media, *RTL Boulevard* was the main source of information. While these are arguably the most central platforms in their own genre, other media outlets that are not listed above but nevertheless are still relatively central were occasionally also included, such as the magazine *Grazia*. So the list of selected media outlet is not restricted to the ones mentioned previously.

Concerning the sample of cougars, each celebrity was sampled with the definition of a cougar in mind. So, the women therefore needed to be well above forty and have a considerable age gap with their significant other (Ames & Burcon, 2011). Secondly, since this research focuses on celebrities, the cougars have to be very famous, since the degree of stardom influences the extent and depth of coverage to be found in gossip media (Meyers, 2009). Taking these criteria into account, a relatively

small population is available for this study. Not a lot of celebrities are cougars, and very famous throughout society.

Bearing these criteria in mind, the women sampled for this study are: Patricia Paay, Heleen van Royen, Madonna and Demi Moore. While there exist more celebrity cougars than merely those four, the other cougars were in the case of Dutch cougars either too young, such as Carice van Houten (41) with her younger boyfriend Kees van Houten (27), or their age gap was too little such as television host Linda de Mol (50) with her partner Jeroen Rietbergen (44). Concerning international cougars, the list of women who regularly date younger men is somewhat longer. However, since the media outlets are Dutch, the news items are often nationally oriented. Occasionally, they discuss *big* international superstars, leading to the selection of only Madonna and Demi Moore. Other cougars are just not famous enough in the Netherlands to be regularly reported in gossip news such as actress Susan Surandon (68) who used to date a 30 year old younger partner Jonathan Bricklin or comedian Kathy Griffin (54) who used to go out with the 20 years younger Randy Bick. Although the selected women for this study are a mix of Dutch and North American celebrities, an international comparison does not fit the purpose of this research.

The final step in this sampling procedure concerns the news items that were selected. All news events that concerned the love life of the cougars were sampled. Those events were looked up online by using relationship timelines that are created by established news platforms that keep track of celebrity events. For instance, the newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* has archived each single news item about important relationship events (e.g. engagements, relationship fights, break ups, hook ups etc.) and published these events online in chronological order. Knowing when which important relationship event occurred, other gossip media were tracked down for their news items and sampled for this research.

The archive of the royal library was used to retrieve gossip magazines. Also, most newspapers have their stories online, hence news that features in *De Telegraaf* or *Algemeen Dagblad* were accessible via the Internet. Most audiovisual material was found online. However, some were not accessible and were requested through the network of the researcher, and were retrieved via a gatekeeper.

### **3.1 Data analysis**

These stories in gossip media were analyzed on the basis of Strauss & Corbin (1998) formulation of the grounded theory approach. This type of data analysis entails three steps: open, axial and selective coding. During the first step of open coding, the gossip items are observed and everything that is deemed relevant should be taken notice of. The themes and concepts that are derived from the data are still tentative in this stage of the analysis. Then, the data is further reduced and refined by axial coding. In this step, deeper meaning is attached to the categories and relationships among categories are established: what overlaps and what does not? Finally, selective coding is mostly used for refinement, and at this part of the analysis, in an ideal situation, theoretical saturation is reached.

To further illustrate this process: the researcher made a data matrix in which first of all, necessary information was written, e.g. which medium, what date, and how this information is retrievable (e.g. a link or a scan of a magazine), followed by interesting quotes, and coded themes. So for every news item, all interesting quotes were written down in the data matrix (open coding). Once this was done for every news item on all selected cougar relationships, themes were attached to all retrieved quotes and pieces of information (axial coding). Once all news items were coded, a new file was created to put all codes in one document. This allowed for seeing overlap between themes, and formulating a couple of grand themes.

#### **4. Results**

Before delving deeper into the concrete results about the love lives of cougars and how that relates to scientific theory, some context needs to be given that could help to understand the data better. First of all, while researching this topic, it came to the fore that these women all had certain life experiences that overlap. They all have been through at least one divorce, have children, and finally, their careers are quite successful. Secondly, before they became involved in sexual relationships with younger men, they all already established a reputation of being in touch with their sexuality.

Madonna for instance, has a reputation of engaging in controversial acts. This is not exclusively linked to her sexuality, as her music video of “Like a Prayer”, depicted Jesus as a black man. At the time of that video release, this music video was considered a controversy. The same goes for her performances and personality in which she built a reputation of being comfortable of expressing her sexual desires.



For instance, she released a book *Sex* that contained erotic pictures of her, produced an album called *Erotica* in which she sings about sex related themes. Over time, she built an image of an artist that is not shy to break with social conventions and taboos concerning sexuality.

Dutch novelist Heleen van Royen is also considered to break taboos, and is sometimes even framed by media as somebody who provokes, as she uses her body and her sexuality as provocative art. For instance, she created wallpaper with a print that constitutes of pictures of her butt and exhibits pictures of herself in museums of her naked body. Also, before she became a cougar, she expressed feelings of desire towards several famous Dutch men and women in public media (for instance, the prime minister Marc Rutte, singer Simon Keizer and singer Anouk). Not only does she openly express her sexual desires about her private life in several gossip media, in her work as a novelist, she regularly writes about themes that have to do with sexuality and intimacy. For instance, she released a book *Stout* (translation: naughty) on sexual fantasies of Dutch female celebrities, in collaboration with lingerie designer and one of her close friends Marlies Dekkers

Concerning Patricia Paay and Demi Moore, they also have developed quite a reputation concerning their sexuality. Both celebrities have posed naked in different adult magazines. For instance, Patricia Paay posed for the Playboy decades before she became a cougar. More recently, she posed for Playboy and at the age of 63, she gave an elaborate striptease that was videotaped and spread throughout gossip media, and she dared a male radio host to French kiss with her live on the radio. In short, just like the other women discussed so far, is she not afraid to flaunt her sexuality.

Like all the other cougars, Demi Moore also made a career in front of the camera and developed an image of being sexually desirable. Before her forties, she already posed nude for adult magazines several times. Also, when she was pregnant with her second child, she posed naked in front of photographer Anny Leibowitz for *Vanity Fair* magazine. This picture stirred some controversy: is a pregnant woman able to be seen as a sex symbol, even when she is pregnant? More recently, when she was already considered a cougar, she posted a picture on social media of her in a tiny bikini, maintaining an image of a woman who is not shy to express her body in front of the camera.

In short, while all these women might differ in how they established and still maintain an image of a woman that is in touch with her sexuality, what they have in

common is that before being labeled as a cougar, their sexual activities were already discussed in gossip media and they were seen as triggers of controversies. This contextualization does not necessarily predict any outcome on the construction of “the cougar” on gossip media, but it might help to understand that these women were already heavily scrutinized on their sexual activities before becoming cougars. They are a vital source of information for the gossip industry already before they established relationships with younger lovers, and now that they are involved in relationships with so-called “toyboys”, they continue to be resourceful for gossip media. This might mean that it would be counterproductive for this industry to bite the hand that feeds them, i.e. to completely bash the sexual behavior of those celebrities. But is that really the case? In other words, how are these cougars, their toyboys and their relationships described?

There were two main themes derived from the data. First of all, the gossip media tend to discuss the relationships that cougars have with their much younger partners in terms of a power imbalance. The cougar is portrayed as an independent woman with a dominant personality that uses her toyboy as a tool to advance her already impressive career and to fulfill her sexual needs. Her partner, on the other hand, is dependent on her career achievements and follows her lead. The second theme derived concerns the gossip media’s categorizations of gender and age. These media have articulated particular ways of how gender and age should intersect: for instance by articulating that old men are unattractive, while these young male partners are described as handsome Gods. The results are structured as follows: first of all, the theme of power imbalance is explained in-depth, followed by a detailed analysis on the second theme that concerns intersectionality.

#### **4.1 (In)Dependent: Discussing the relationship in terms of a power imbalance**

##### *4.1.1 Career*

From a career perspective, the gossip media describe the cougar as an independent woman that does not need to rely on anybody, let alone her significant other. She is financially independent and she achieved this through her career. Although her career is not exactly in its heyday, she has an established legacy, unlike her younger partner(s). It even got to a point that when relationships with toyboys end, she is quoted by gossip media to be the one that gave the career of her ex a boost, simply

because of her name, experience and established career.

In her divorce with the much younger Ashton Kutcher, it was told by gossip media that Demi thought that she is accountable for Aston's success in Hollywood, and therefore demanded a sum of money during their divorce:

“According to our source, Demi thinks that he would not get famous without getting married to her, and that therefore she should get a great deal of money from him” [*De Telegraaf*, 6 March 2013].

Another example is with the much younger model and DJ Jesus Luz that Madonna dated for a while. When they were dating, several news media reported how she helped him with his modeling career. When this relationship ended, she started to date a younger guy from her dance crew. *Algemeen Dagblad* reported that it was unclear whether this new lover of hers would do the same - i.e. benefiting from her career.

“Brahim knows very well that Madonna's last toyboy, the 24 year old Brazilian Jesus Luz, was very clever in making money by dating the singer. He went from being an aspiring model, to a DJ that makes 25000 a night, and he is now a model for the brand Dolce and Gabbana. But Brahim is not planning on exploiting this relationship” [*Algemeen Dagblad*, 3 December 2010].

In this light, the woman in the relationship is portrayed as the one with an established name and career who is also financially independent, while her significant other is the exact opposite, as he is dependent on her success to advance his career.

Indeed, a younger male partner in these kinds of relationships is often framed as the one being dependent of her career, as he does not have established one yet. Without her, he would not be even considered to be relevant within his field. He cannot do it on his own, but rather is dependent on her. Consider the case of Heleen van Royen's significant other. His name is Bart Meeldijk and is a drummer of a band called Rigby. During a news item of *RTL Boulevard*, the voice over mentioned the following:

“For the last five years, the band Rigby is trying to have their major breakthrough, but since the drummer of the band, Bart, has a relationship with Heleen van Royen, the band cannot go unnoticed. The actual publicity they get is caused by Heleen van Royen” [*RTL Boulevard*, 24 July 2013].

While in the same news item, Heleen and Bart completely deny that she is responsible for the publicity the band gets, the news item ends with the same voice over stating:

“But still, having Heleen van Royen as a band mascot can’t hurt” [*RTL Boulevard*, 24 July 2013].

The band is therefore framed as being dependent of Heleen van Royen’s name and fame. Their success is generated by the romance of the drummer with Heleen van Royen. This discourse, of the cougar having an established name and career on which the toyboy is dependent on, is repeatedly found. It signifies the dependency of a younger man in his relationship with an older woman.

At the same time, it needs to be addressed that the careers of these women are not exactly in their prime. They do have an established career, but in order to give their current work some extra publicity, these women are portrayed as using their toyboys as tools to promote and revitalize their career. For example, when Heleen van Royen was publishing her new book, she appeared with her new much younger boyfriend to all kinds of media events. Gossip media therefore framed it as if she knew the exact moment when to introduce him to the press in order to give some extra publicity to her work as a novelist. Gossip magazine *Story* wrote the following:

“Her book is now being published, so it’s quite convenient for her to have a “new boyfriend”: Heleen obviously knows like no-one else how to perfectly time these kinds of events” [*Story*, 28 May 2013].

Again her agency is stressed as her boyfriend is framed as a tool to strengthen her career, which is also emphasized by putting the words new boyfriend in quotations marks. *Story* is hereby making clear that they are skeptical about the nature of this relationship as they hint that her date is merely a mean to promote her career.

This implies that they mutually benefit from one another, as he needs her to advance his own career and she needs him to boost her own. This is not entirely correct, as even if the woman revitalizes her career by getting into the spotlights with a new lover, it is always *her* established career that got both of them in the spotlights in the first place. Indeed, when discussing such events in gossip media, often a short overview of *her* career is given in order to frame the relevance of that news item, followed by a section on her new career activities in combination with her new much

younger male lover. In other words, she falls back on her legacy, while trying to advance it by dating a younger partner.

#### 4.1.2 Dominance

Another aspect that illustrates a power imbalance, is the personality traits in which she is described in. All cougars are described to have strong personalities. In one way or another, she is the one that is in control of the relationship because of her dominant personality. One news item captures this theme perfectly. The headline of the news story of *Algemeen Dagblad* [28 August 2011] showed: “Even while jet skiing, Madonna runs the show”, with an accompanying picture of her confidently steering a jet ski while her boyfriend is visibly scared and uncomfortable sitting behind her and holding onto her (image 1).



**Image 1: Scared toyboy holds onto Madonna as she steers the jet ski**

The story that followed described him as somebody that does not have any choice but to hold onto her, while she was in control. The exact quote was the following:

“Madonna (52) leaves us no doubt about who is in control of the relationship: she was determined in steering the jet ski, while her toyboy Brahim (24) did not have any choice but to hold onto her slim body” [*Algemeen Dagblad*, 26 August 2011].

This news item is illustrative for how cougars are generally portrayed as dominant women that are in control of their relationships, whereas her younger partner is rather following her lead. Also, in one news item, it was portrayed that the toyboy of Patricia Paay should comply with her “strict demands” [AT5, 12 May 2010]. Therefore, once again, the woman is portrayed as more dominant than the man.

#### *4.1.3 Sexuality*

Cougars are presented as loving sex and as not afraid to express that sentiment. Concerning this theme, it was clear how cougars are able to seek out and enjoy sexual encounters with younger men. For instance, after her divorce with Adam Curry, with whom she has a daughter, the following was said about Patricia Paay:

Voice over: “After her divorce, Paay isn’t shy to entertain all male suitors”

Patricia Paay: “That was a therapy, the best therapy I could ever imagine” [RTL Boulevard, 3 May 2013].

While this could be seen as a phase since she was going through a divorce and she labels it as something therapeutic, she was in the news on a regular basis on the count of her sexual escapades. She would demand that her younger partner would take a course in stripping, which also signifies how she uses her toyboy as a sexual tool [AT5, 12 May 2010]. Furthermore, she appeared in gossip news for mentioning how she loves porn [AT5, 2 December 2011]. In other words, in these news stories, older women are seen as sexual persons that use younger men for their hot bodies. One of the guys Demi Moore was dating for a while reportedly placed a pearl in his penis in order to produce extra sexual arousal while having intercourse [*Algemeen Dagblad*, 23 May 2013]. This illustrates that younger men are described in terms of how they could contribute to the relationship sexually. Their bodies are sexual tools for the enjoyment of the cougar. This is reinforced with another finding, which concerns the interchangeability of toyboys.

Besides being overtly portrayed in gossip media as a woman that enjoys sex, intimacy, and actively seeks for those sexual activities, another aspect of this theme that illustrates the sexual agency of the cougar is how interchangeable their toyboys are for them. It frequently came to the fore how often cougars were switching from one young love interest to another. This was also reflected in the ways in which gossip media spoke about it:

“Madonna scores yet another toyboy” and “After breaking up with Jesus, Madonna set her eyes on yet another, new, very young model” [*De Telegraaf*, 7 February 2010].

Or consider the following example about Demi Moore:

“Demi likes Will, but she likes to have a number of contacts in her phone that she could reach out to when she is in need of some company” [*De Telegraaf*, 9 May 2013].

This stresses Demi Moore’s sexual agency: while she was seeing Will Hannigan at the time, she was also reportedly seen with other men with whom she enjoyed herself with. This exemplifies that younger men in these kinds of relationships are not irreplaceable to their female partners and again suggests, and reinforces the power imbalance between the two in this dyad.

## 4.2 Intersectionality

### 4.2.1 *Young hot men, decent-looking older women*

Related to the finding that toyboys seen as (interchangeable) sexual tools, their appearance is also associated with physical beauty, as sexual interaction often requires some kind of physical attraction. So, how exactly are the bodies of a cougar and a toyboy assessed in terms of physical attractiveness?

Evidently, age and gender seems to be two relevant categories in order to assess the physical beauty of a person. The older women are always described in terms of that they look pretty for their age. They are never mentioned to be just “beautiful”. This implies that beauty is heavily age related for women: as they grow older, they can only be considered beautiful within the parameters of their age. Their younger male partners, on the other hand are often described in gossip media in God-like terms. One of Madonna’s younger love interests, a dancer, was described as a dancing *hunk*, and her ex-partner and younger model was described as a young *Adonis* and a *God*. Younger male partners in these relationships are seen as handsome, in which the gossip media applaud the older woman for *her* catch. This analogy has a couple of implications. First of all, the literal meaning of the word cougar (a predator) is being applied. She is discussed as the hunter, whereas he is the

prey. Secondly, the success of her catch is assessed in terms of physical attractiveness. For instance, the boyfriend of Heleen van Royen, was discussed in the gossip show *RTL Boulevard* as follows:

“He looks so good! She has done a good job” [*RTL Boulevard*, 8 May 2013].

The host of this gossip show emphasized that *she* had done a good job, exemplifying that her “hunt” was successful since he is assessed as handsome.

It already came to the fore in the literature review that age is a mediator in terms of how people assess physical beauty. Beauty is associated with youth, and this criterion is especially applicable for women in comparison to men. Here is where intersectionality becomes blatantly apparent: old men are not assessed the same in terms of physical appeal compared to old women. As the saying goes: men age like fine wine whereas women age like milk. So far, the data showed that indeed young men are deemed attractive, while old women are able to be beautiful only to a certain extent, within the parameters of their age. Additionally, the data showed that gossip media also evaluate old men in terms of their physical appearance. Specifically, they are regarded as unattractive, and not compatible with cougars as they following quote about Patricia Paay illustrates:

She does not like men of her own age. Those are 65-year-old men, who have hair coming out of their nose and ears. That disgusts her. She does not want to have those kinds of men. She still wants a relationship, but preferably with someone younger who doesn't have grey hairs coming out of his nose and ears [*Prive TV*, 14 March 2015].

In this example, the television reporter himself envisioned what Patricia Paay's type is. He condemned older men, as they are not appealing concerning their physical features due to ageing. Younger men are framed as not having these problems, and so when discussing what is appropriate for a cougar, older men are seen as not good enough in terms of physical attraction compared to younger men.

#### 4.2.2 *Wise mothers with boyish partners*

She is regarded as an old, wise woman that gained her wisdom from all those life events she has been through like raising children. He is framed as also benefiting from her experience as he is considered to be immature. In this regard, she is a teacher and



he is framed as the student. This was literally mentioned by Brahim, a French dancer Madonna used to date, about how she copes with life in general:

“I learn a lot from the way she handles things. I am a student of hers” [*Algemeen Dagblad*, 3 December 2010].

This discourse that old women are strong and wise, was repeatedly found. Not only in relation to younger men, but also in relation to younger women. In an interview Patricia Paay mentioned:

“Men benefit from dating older women. Us older women have more life experience, are more comfortable in our skin and know what we want. All that nagging about: ‘does my butt look big?’, well, we don't make a fuss out of it. We know by now what our strengths are” [*Grazia*, 9 October, 2013].

In this quote, Patricia makes a statement that young women worry too much about nothing, and because they are so young, they do not possess the same amount of wisdom as older women. So old women are placed in a discourse of having life experience and wisdom due to their age. They are able to reflect on things and are handling things differently than younger women.

Not only does the theme of wisdom say something about how younger women are compared with older ones, young men were also framed as immature and playful. One can therefore see how age and gender are related to how celebrities are depicted: old women are wise and young men are playful and immature. Repeatedly, Patricia Paay's ex toyboy Nicky van Dam was depicted, when they split up, as a “rascal and a hothead” [*Story*, 18 March 2014]. While it was fun to hang out for a while, their age differences were reflected in their (im)mature behavior, which led to a break-up. Patricia Paay even compared him to having another child, even while she was still dating him. Her daughter was living in the United States while Patricia Paay co-opted with her boyfriend Nicky in the Netherlands. When her daughter decided to move back in with her mom, she decided to dedicate her time to her daughter and told Nicky to move out.

“Look, he is always most welcome here and he will visit every once in a while, but not as much as before. My child is my number one priority and well, one child is more than enough, right?” [*De Telegraaf*, 28 January 2013].

Not only does this quote exemplify that the toyboys are depicted as having child-like qualities, but also that these women dedicate their time to their children. All cougars in this study are mothers, and the discourse that their children are their number one priority often comes to the fore. This might portray a somewhat stereotypical image of ageing: being not only a woman but also a mother, would lead to being a wise person. Her younger partner however, is portrayed to have boyish qualities.

#### *4.2.3 An adventurous lifestyle*

He lets her feel young by going to events that are associated with youth e.g. clubbing, going to concerts and going on exciting dates. However, it is not necessarily the case that younger men drag these older women out of their dusty drags, into a vibrant life. Often, these women are discussed in terms of how they love to live an active life, and how these younger men are able to fit in. Old men, on the other hand are regarded as not being able to adjust to their wishes. Madonna was quoted as followed:

“I am an adventurous person and I live a hectic life. I mean, a guy should be pretty open-minded and adventurous to be able to fit into my world. Old men are usually less open to such adventure compared to younger guys” [*Algemeen Dagblad*, 10 March 2015].

In terms of intersectionality, this is an interesting development, as this shows that ageing has different effects for old men compared to these old women. The men are labeled as rusty and not adventurous whereas the women are seeking men who are able to give them the youthful and adventurous lifestyle that they want to have. In all cases, young men were labeled as good for them, as they let these women feel youthful again. Only Demi Moore was viewed as a “victim” of hanging around young people, doing youthful activities, since she was hospitalized a couple of times as a result of exhaustion and substance abuse – i.e. drugs. So, she was an exception in this data, but that was due to the destructive outcomes of partaking in those events. Overall, the data shows that young men are beneficial for older women in these relationships since they enable the woman to act and feel young. At the same time, this might suggest that one is only able to have a good time when acting what society deems as “youthful”. Successful ageing might be seen in the light as to the extent in which one feels and acts young, which is accompanied by having a younger male partner.

As a couple they are therefore often discussed in gossip media as having fun together. Not very often is the relationship described as serious, but rather as something that is fun but does not have the potential to last long. A *Carpe Diem*-like discourse seems to be most prevalent when gossip media discuss the two together as a dyad. When they split up, the media relates it to their age gap, by for instance, stating that they are in different phases in their lives.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research was set up to explore two notions. As was mentioned in the introduction, cougars could potentially challenge, first of all, the idea of an a-sexual ageing woman and secondly heteronormative norms. With this in mind, the guiding research question became: How are gender, age, and sexual identity of celebrity cougars constructed in gossip media? The results of the analyses show that, first of all, gossip media present a power imbalance in the gender dyad. The cougar is portrayed as an independent woman with a dominant personality that uses her toyboy as a tool to advance her already impressive career and to fulfill her sexual needs. He is, on the other hand, dependent on her achievements. As presented in the introduction and theoretical framework, this is not considered as within the boundaries of heterosexual norms and it undermines the notion of an a-sexual old woman. It also challenges the notion that men need to dominate over women in heterosexual relationships. Yet, a gendered power imbalance remains intact, as gossip media represent the cougar as a dominant woman, and her partner as someone that follows her lead. While gossip media present these relationships as something that is out of the norm, they seldom condemn these relationships.

These results differ in comparison to previous studies on cougars and their younger male partners. For instance in the study of (e.g. Hamid-Turksoy et al. (2014), the British tabloids openly label the relationships of ordinary British women with their Turkish toyboys as deviant. Also, some discourse of deviance was anticipated since literature of heteronormative identity and gender performativity explain that acts that fall outside the norm, “denaturalize” what is considered to be “natural”, and therefore are more prone to skeptic discussion. However, Dutch gossip media did not produce such a deviance frame.

One possible explanation is related to the second main finding. The gossip media discussed the toyboys and cougars in terms of how men and women of

particular age categories “are”. They present older men as unattractive and unadventurous, whereas these toy boys are discussed as young, handsome and vivid. The cougars were deemed as wise mothers that achieved their wisdom due to ageing. Younger women did not achieve such wisdom yet. These typologies are not strikingly different from popular wisdom. As mentioned in the literature review, gossip media tend to not break with general beliefs (Van Zoonen, 1998). Older women are supposed to be wise and grown-up have children: this is a very acceptable way to perform the intersection of age and gender. Especially motherhood is celebrated as doing gender/age in an appropriate way (DeMeulenaere Weedon, 2013).

While these gossip media present some aspects of the relationship, as not in accordance with traditional norms of heterosexual relationships, i.e. the dominance of an old woman over a young man in terms of career and sexuality, other aspects are congruent with the general principles of doing gender/age. That is one explanation for why cougars and their relationships were not discussed in terms of deviance. This study therefore suggests, and hereby builds on existing literature in gender studies, that as long as certain performances of age/gender occur within the boundaries of normality, existing notions of gender/age performances in the context of heterosexual relationships can be challenged without triggering too much criticism. If relationships are discussed that are incongruent with existing norms of heterosexuality, they are probably evaluated on the basis of the appropriateness of gendered acts. As with cougars: they were mothers and wise old ladies, whereas the toyboy acts boyish, which are performances of age and gender intersected that are congruent with the legacy of performances enacted before them.

Indeed, Hamid-Turksoy et al. (2014) findings showed that older British women that dated younger Turkish men were deemed to be bad mothers, and so the relationship was criticized. There are other factors that could have led to the negative evaluation of performing the intersection of gender/age in Hamid-Turksoy’s et al. (2014) study. First of all, this present study sampled celebrity cougars, and not ordinary British working class women. Probably the expectations of celebrities are somewhat different from the rest of society, especially since these four women sampled for this study already gained a reputation of breaking taboos and norms before they got their status as a cougar. So, being involved in relationships that could be considered as “deviant” could be expected from these women, since they already developed a reputation to doing things differently from the norm. Also, unlike Hamid-

Turksoy et al. (2014), this study used Dutch gossip media, and not British tabloids. Dutch media have a reputation for being relatively mild in their evaluations on life events (Van Zoonen, 1998).

Finally, cougars that are deemed to be attractive could be seen as a sexual fantasy for heterosexual men. The study of Hamid-Turksoy et al. (2014) concerned an analysis on ordinary women, whereas in this study the cougars were described in terms of how attractive they still look for their age. These celebrity cougars are still seen as having some kind of sex appeal. Apparently, men seem to enjoy pornified cougars, as MILF's, Mom I'd Like to Fuck, a term that is almost synonym for cougar (unlike MILF, a cougar is an older woman but not necessarily a mother) are currently in the top three of most viewed genres according to one of the largest porn sites (Pornhub, 2014). This could possibly lead to a less critical or negative sentiment towards *attractive* cougars, albeit the relationship between gossip media's representation of cougars and sexual fantasies is probably not a direct one. While this relationship between the upholding of a sexual male fantasy of attractive old women and a non-judgmental discourse might be a tricky one, the data of this study did show that the body of the ageing female celebrity is still a relevant matter of discussion in gossip media. She was described as attractive, but it was always related to her age: she was not deemed to be beautiful in general, but beautiful for her age. Indeed, as the literature already showed, gossip media heavily scrutinize the ageing female body (Fairclough, 2012), as well as fictional cougars in television series (Kaklamanidou, 2012).

All in all, this research thus showed continuity with some aspects of the literature: the fixation of motherhood in gossip media, the relevance of the body of the ageing female in media representation, and the portrayal of popular wisdom in gossip magazines. However, this type of relationship is not part of the norm of the existing notions on heteronormativity and therefore it could have been expected that these gossip media would discuss these relationships in terms of deviance. This did not happen as the acts associated with the intersection of gender and age, were presented as sensible. Three reasons for why these acts were presented that way has to do with 1) that these women are celebrities 2) the Dutch gossip media are not notorious for their harsh evaluations and 3) these celebrity cougars were presented as attractive, and thus a sexual male fantasy of attractive old women is upheld.

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