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# Older women using women's magazines: the construction of knowledgeable selves

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## Abstract

Women's magazines are widely read in Canada. The popularity of such magazines is significant because critical gerontologists, primarily drawing on content analyses of the magazines, often argue that these publications convey problematic messages about ageing. This article broaches the subject of women's magazines and ageing from a different vantage point, that of the older woman reader herself. This audience-centred research draws on 21 semi-structured interviews with Canadian women over the age of 55. The study examines what older women say about the ageing-related content of women's magazines, along with what they say about how, when and why they read these magazines. Findings illustrate that participants are aware of the inadequate and unrealistic representations of older women in women's magazines. Nonetheless, they value the publications as a source of practical information on a variety of topics and as a light and undemanding source of entertainment and relaxation. The study reveals how participants assess and deploy magazine contents and characteristics in ways that contribute to, and are informed by, their lives and identities as older women. Against the broader cultural context of ageism, using and talking about women's magazines enables the participants to position themselves as knowledgeable and informed on a variety of topics and in multiple interactions, both in explicit reference to the magazines themselves and more generally in their lives.

**Keywords:** women's magazines; older women; magazine reading; ageing; identity; self-positioning; Canada

## Introduction

Critical gerontologists often argue that women's magazines contain problematic ageist biases. In fashion magazines, for example, older women and their sartorial concerns are largely absent (Twigg, 2010; Lewis *et al.*, 2011). In some cases, older women are derogatorily cast as frumpish and outdated (Lövgren, 2013). In others, scholars detect ideals of 'successful ageing' (Rowe and Kahn, 1998) in women's magazines (Soden, 2012; Wada *et al.*, 2015; O'Hanlon and Mendez, 2016). Though lauding healthy, active and socially engaged older adults appears uncomplicated, critics assert that this ideal neglects questions of class, disability

and other structural inequalities, places unrealistic pressures on the individual and overemphasises consumption as a means to age ‘well’ (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1995; Minkler and Fadem, 2002; Martinson and Minkler, 2006; Rozanova, 2010; Katz and Calasanti, 2015). Moreover, some argue that ostensibly positive portrayals of capable and attractive older women rely upon and invoke a contrasting stereotype of decline (Soden, 2012; *see also* McHugh, 2003).

Frequently, analysts point to magazines as sites for what Jerslev (2018: 351) labels ‘the intertwining of youth with beauty that permeates Western culture and is one of the main cultural constituents of ageism’. Women’s magazines – and especially the advertisements within them – are singled out for transmitting the message that (appearing that one is) ageing is undesirable and that it can and should be avoided through beauty products and practices (Coupland, 2009; Hurd Clarke, 2011; Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko, 2012; Smirnova, 2012; Ellison, 2014; Del Rosso, 2017; Searing and Zeilig, 2017). Brown and Knight (2015) observe, moreover, that such pressures to remain youthful have remained constant in some magazines since the 1960s.

Granted, such age-related content in women’s magazines is not always considered inescapably or uniformly troublesome. Hurd Clarke (2011) points out that older women sometimes contest the imperative of anti-ageing beauty work promoted in magazines, while Twigg (2012, 2018) notes the magazines’ treatment of fashion can empower older women to negotiate mainstream ageist culture more successfully. Finally, a recent trend to use older women in some advertisements may hold the potential for moving beyond youth-bound understandings of beauty (Jerslev, 2018). These potentials aside, the fact remains that many older women are reading magazines that some scholars find at least implicitly ageist.

One is tempted to ask, then, why older women would want to read such seemingly problematic publications. What might they gain from them? In this paper, we suggest answers to this question based on what older Canadian women readers themselves say about the magazines and the roles they play in their lives. In doing so, we move away from the content analyses that form the foundation of many of the above studies. Instead, we place ourselves within a tradition of magazine scholarship that grounds itself in a reader- or audience-centred approach. Specifically, we explore how older women use and talk about women’s magazines in ways that allow them to consolidate and position themselves as competent and knowledgeable subjects. We discuss how reading women’s magazines helps older women to learn, use and signal that they know something about a variety of topics (such as parenting or health), while talking about the magazines further allows them to show that they also know something *about the magazines* (in terms of their limitations, characteristics and overall significance). We focus additionally on how this knowledge is deployed in interaction with others, allowing women to enact an identity that contrasts with the devalued role of older women in the broader culture and, often, within the very magazines they read.

In what follows, we review the scholarship on magazines that contextualises and contributes to these arguments. We then describe specific features of the Canadian magazine market and the place of older adults and women’s magazines within it. This context is followed by a description of our methods and finally by the presentation and discussion of our findings.

## Audience-centred magazine research

There is a tradition of feminist literature on women's magazines that accords readers a degree of agency *vis-à-vis* the genre. In contrast to Betty Friedan (1963), who famously saw women as uncritically digesting the patriarchal ideology of women's magazines, later scholars began to move away from critiques centred on magazine texts and towards a deeper understanding of the complicated roles women's magazines could play in readers' lives. Winship (1987), for example, identified the pleasure women (including herself) could derive from reading women's magazines. She saw them as an affordable treat, much like a box of chocolates, that women could give themselves and savour. Ballaster *et al.* (1991) further revealed that women did not naively or completely accept the constructions of femininity offered by the magazines. While these authors maintained their belief in the fundamental conservatism of women's magazines, they nonetheless began to consider the opinions and positions of readers themselves more seriously than did Friedan.

Later scholars more consciously and deeply based their work on magazine audiences via interviews with readers. Some used focus groups to explore the perspectives of adolescent girls as they 'talked back' (Currie, 1999: 82) to the troubling messages proffered in teen magazines (*see also* Frazer, 1987). McDonnell (2014) interviewed a group of museum co-workers in their twenties and thirties to find that they also often challenged the moral prescriptions of ideal femininity communicated in celebrity gossip magazines. She underscored audience agency by exploring what she labels the 'pleasure of detection' (McDonnell, 2014: 90) that women experience when they attempt to discern truth from falsity in the magazines' ambiguous images and misleading stories. This discernment is itself one means by which the readers dispute the magazines' messages. While our work is more directly concerned with constructions of ageing than constructions of femininity, we take a cue from studies acknowledging the agency of readers and the potential for them to recognise and push back against problematic content in women's magazines (Korinek, 2000; Hurd Clarke, 2011).

Other audience-based scholarship has explored the more instrumental roles women's magazines play. Oates' (1997) readers, for example, used magazines as a trusted source of practical, including health-related (*see also* van den Berg, 2015), information that would be of use in their everyday lives. For the women in the study of Stevens *et al.* (2007), on the other hand, magazines played a key role in facilitating and legitimating valuable 'me-time' away from other family members amidst the women's hectic 'juggling' lifestyles. Similarly, in work linking women's reading practices with the textual structure of women's magazines, Ytre-Arne (2011b: 219) found that readers used such media either for the purposes of 'relaxation, reward, and ritual' in contrast to their busy lives, or for fragmented "skimming" in a free moment'. More broadly, Ytre-Arne (2014) examined how readers interpret magazine content in relation to their own daily experiences and, importantly, in relation to and also as part of constructing their own identities.

In understanding women's magazines as resources for identity construction, Ytre-Arne (2014), like many of the studies above, draws on the foundational work of Joke Hermes. For Hermes (1995: 6), who refrained from analysing the texts herself, women's magazines 'become meaningful exclusively through the

perception of their readers'. In analysing this process, Hermes identifies a series of interpretive 'repertoires': identity-consolidating rhetorical tools that the Dutch readers she interviewed employed when they spoke about the magazines. Key repertoires were that women's magazines were 'easily put down' and a source of 'relaxation', with the former repertoire being particularly common among the women with young children. Women also employed the repertoire of 'practical knowledge' in reference to the home-making tips and tricks they gleaned from the magazines. Hermes argued that this repertoire allowed women to construct fantasies of their ideal selves as pragmatic and capable home-makers. In this way, and though ultimately warning that scholars should not overestimate the 'meaningfulness' of the genre, Hermes (1995: 16) asserts that women's magazines provide readers with moments of control in their lives.

We, too, are inspired by Hermes' concept of interpretive repertoires in this paper but, along with Ytre-Arne (2014), we are also interested in questions of how older women 'position the self' through discursive processes that involve reflection on the connections – or lack thereof – of the magazines' contents with readers' daily realities. Analytically useful here is the distinction between discursive repertoires and discursive dispositions, on which Jackson *et al.* (2001) elaborate in their focus group study of men's magazine readers. While the former are akin to Hermes' interpretive repertoires that rely on culturally recognisable patterns, the latter capture the differing and more personal reactions that readers express towards such repertoires. Ranging from celebratory or compliant to rejecting or dismissive, these dispositions, Jackson *et al.* (2001) argue, are related to readers' cultural capital but need to be interpreted in light of the participants' interaction with one another and interviewers as well.

On this note, issues of impression management (Goffman, 1959) in the interview setting are worthwhile to consider, something Ylänne (2012c) indicates is of particular salience when studying older adults and the media. In the context of our research, motivations for positive self-presentation may be related to the fact that older women in particular are culturally devalued (Garner, 1999) and, in Canada, often report feeling ignored or that they are assumed to be incompetent (Revera Inc. & International Federation on Ageing, 2013). Further, Hurd Clarke (2003) has shown that older women can be sensitive to how they talk in interviews about pursuits widely considered to be shallow, and reading women's magazines certainly fits into this category (McDonnell, 2014; Moeran, 2015). To be clear, we are not engaging in a formal discourse analysis (for a discussion of such an approach in relation to ageing, see Ylänne, 2012b). We are, however, interested in exploring not only how older women use the contents of women's magazines but also how they talk about this use, and about the magazines themselves, as part of a larger identity-building endeavour.

Given the above context and concerns, we contribute to the broader audience-based literature on women's magazines in several ways. First, we focus purposefully and exclusively on older women readers, in contrast to the above studies that are based on audiences of younger or mixed-age groups of women (or men). Focusing on older women also corresponds with another relatively distinct (Twigg, 2012) feature of our work, which is that it focuses on readers in relation to constructions of aged identities as opposed to constructions of femininity (or masculinity) *per se*. Moreover if, as Hermes (1995) has suggested, the ways that

women use and talk about women's magazines are tied to time and place, then it also bears noting that even the later work cited above pre-dates the large-scale movement of women's magazines online. Also, while much of the scholarship on magazine audiences takes place in the European or US context and in reference to predominantly European and US magazines, our work explores the Canadian context, in which magazines published in Canada play a significant role. Hence through our work we revisit, in this contemporary time-frame, questions of women's magazine use among a group of readers that hitherto has not been the subject of much magazine audience research: older women in Canada.

### The Canadian magazine market

Since at least the 1950s, Canadian magazines have been seen as key elements of the Canadian government's desire to express, develop and protect Canadian culture (Azzi, 1999; Armstrong, 2000). In Canada, culture is understood as a way of life, which can be distinguished from the understanding in the USA of culture-as-commodity (Armstrong, 2000; Gagné, 2019). Culture is an expression of national identity for many Canadians, and this identity is also commonly set in distinction to that of the 'Americans' (Adams, 2003). As such, Canadian identity is generally characterised by more progressive social ideals and an emphasis on pride in and the preservation of a diversity of cultures (including that of Indigenous peoples, French and English settlers, and immigrant populations). Since the 1980s, and despite pressures presented by economic globalisation, trade liberalisation, and powerful US political and commercial interests, there have been consistent and relatively successful efforts by the Canadian government to protect Canadian cultural products such as magazines through an insistence on so-called 'cultural exemption' clauses in international free trade agreements (Armstrong, 2000; Goff, 2007; Neathery-Castro, 2012; Ades and Larouche-Maltais, 2019). Thus, the nation's magazine industry has long been the beneficiary of government policies that have resulted in a cluster of tax rules, exemptions and subsidies aimed at supporting and distributing Canadian cultural content through periodicals.

Magazine industry data indicate that magazines, and specifically Canadian magazines, do matter to Canadians. Per capita magazine readership in Canada is higher than in any other 'developed' country (Magazines Canada, 2016a). Despite recent declines in advertising and circulation revenues (Ontario Creates, 2018), magazines are still read by nine out of ten Canadians over the age of 12 (Rody-Mantha, 2018c). Adults over 50 (and particularly over 65) have the highest rates of readership (Magazines Canada, 2016b). The print platform also remains relatively strong, with an estimated 64 per cent of Canadian magazine consumers reading magazines exclusively in print (Rody-Mantha, 2018b). Regardless of assumptions that online magazine content is displacing the print format among readers, in Canada there is evidence to suggest that digital versions of magazines supplement and do not displace print copies, with one survey indicating that 92 per cent of readers read both print and digital or print editions only (Magazines Canada, 2017a). In addition, and in line with international studies revealing older adults' general 'media use traditionalism' (Nimrod, 2017), in Canada digital magazine consumption is highest amongst younger adults aged 18–20 (with 40%

being monthly digital magazine readers) and lowest among those aged 70 and over (17% are monthly digital magazine readers; Magazines Canada, 2017b). Finally, specifically Canadian content means something to magazine readers, who consume more Canadian content via magazines (and often through print subscriptions) than via television, books or film (Magazines Canada, 2010: 4), and who widely acknowledge the importance of Canadian (as opposed to US) editorial and advertising content in magazines (Magazines Canada, 2016a: 22).

Within this context, it is not surprising that the Canadian publications *Chatelaine* and *Canadian Living*, the two women's magazines most commonly read by our participants, are extremely popular in Canada. In contrast to the USA, where women's magazines are said to be 'dying' (Ramanathan, 2018) and where several well-known titles such as *Glamour*, *Self* and *Redbook* are now only available online, the print readership of *Chatelaine* and *Canadian Living* places both among the top five of all magazines in Canada (Rody-Mantha, 2018a). Both publications are consciously national brands and routinely contain content featuring Canadian personalities, places and public issues. *Chatelaine* (founded in 1928) has been a particular object of study. Smith (2014) discusses *Chatelaine's* role in constructing a Canadian national identity through fiction in the 1930s and 1940s. Fraser (1997) characterises the magazine as reflecting the 'Canadian female psyche' throughout the decades. Indeed, Korinek (2007) argues that *Chatelaine* was important in disseminating liberal second-wave feminism in Canada from the late 1950s to the 1970s. Other scholars (e.g. Mendes, 2010; McIntosh, 2014) focus on the empowering role of women's health advice in the magazine. Such advice, still common in the magazine today, must also be understood in the context of generally available health care and socialised health insurance in Canada. Hence, and although we do not explicitly address the national character of magazines in our research, Canadian women's magazines do lend a particular flavour to the country's magazine industry.

## Methods

This qualitative study is based on 21 semi-structured interviews. After securing university research ethics board approval, we recruited participants in select cities and towns in two regions 60–90 minutes west of Toronto. We placed advertisements in local newspapers and posted fliers in public libraries, cafes, bookstores, seniors' centres and community centres. One organisation for older adults circulated our flier via social media. Fliers were also distributed to the members of a retired women's social group and a few participants were recruited through chain-referral sampling. Recruitment materials solicited women over the age of 55 who read women's magazines, with the titles of *Chatelaine*, *Canadian Living*, *Redbook*, *Elle*, *Glamour* and *Woman's Day* given as examples. We chose the age of 55 because it corresponded with the age of women born near the end of the post-war Canadian baby boom.

Despite the relatively broad distribution of recruitment materials, and despite the fact that no one who contacted us and consented to the study was excluded, the resulting research group (see Table 1) was limited in diversity. The participants were all White, ranged in age from 57 to 78 at the time of the interview, and they all lived in their own homes and apartments (had care homes been included in recruitment efforts, the age range would have likely been expanded at the upper end). On the basis of

Table 1. Sample profile

	N
Age range:	
55–60	3
61–65	6
66–70	8
71–75	2
76–80	2
Race:	
White	21
Marital status:	
Married/co-habiting	9
Separated/divorced	8
Widowed	3
Single	1
Educational attainment:	
High school diploma	2
College	5
Some university	3
University degree	5
Postgraduate diploma/Master's degree	6

educational background and present or former occupation (most were retired), the majority of the participants could be classified as middle class, though a few women had working-class backgrounds or lived in income-geared housing complexes.

Participants read a variety of what they themselves (Hermes, 1995) defined as 'women's magazines'. Most publications could be categorised as women's lifestyle or home-making magazines. The most frequently read titles were, in order of popularity: *Chatelaine*; *Canadian Living*; *Woman's Day*; *O, The Oprah Magazine*; *Redbook* and *Good Housekeeping*. Consistent with their significance in the Canadian market, *Chatelaine* and/or *Canadian Living* were read at least occasionally by almost every participant. Interestingly, however, none of the participants mentioned the publications' 'Canadianness' in their interviews. Some women did report reading magazines with a more central focus on fashion or celebrities (e.g. *Vanity Fair* or *Hello! Canada*) and women also frequently identified special-interest magazines as women's magazines. The titles of these latter publications either explicitly mentioned a gender-based audience (e.g. *Country Woman* and *First for Women*, a women's health magazine) or were categorised as such because of the gender-typed nature of the hobby featured in the magazine (e.g. quilting). Finally, and consistent with the patterns noted above, almost all the women reported reading solely the print version of their magazines; no one read magazines exclusively online.



The primary author conducted the interviews between August 2017 and December 2018. Interviews were digitally recorded and lasted up to 80 minutes, with many lasting approximately one hour. Interviews were most commonly held in respondents' homes, private corners in coffee shops or community centres, and the first author's university office. The interview guide consisted of two parts. The first set of questions aimed to uncover when, how and why participants read women's magazines. The second set focused on how older women and the ageing process are represented in women's magazines (e.g. 'Which images, ideals and messages about the ageing process can you recall from your women's magazines?'; 'What do you like and dislike about the portrayals of older adults and ageing in these magazines?'). At the end of the interview, participants were invited to choose their own pseudonyms. These sometimes-humorous pseudonyms are used (and a participant's age is noted the first time she is quoted) in this paper, except where the chosen name might have compromised the anonymity of another participant, in which case the pseudonym was changed. Each interview was transcribed by one of the authors or a research assistant.

We analysed our data with an inductive approach to thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012; Mayan, 2009). The first author initially read, re-read and annotated the transcripts to generate a preliminary list of codes and to group them into tentative categories. These preliminary constructs were then provided to the second author, who independently read, re-read and annotated unmarked copies of the transcripts, looking for similar and additional codes. We then met to review each transcript to compare codes and resolve discrepancies. Further discussions and re-readings allowed us to refine the organisation of the codes into a series of agreed-upon categories. All applicable coded excerpts from each interview were then sorted into the relevant category using NVivo. Reviewing the data in this form allowed us to assess and adjust the categories so that we could be confident that each category represented data that logically fit together. In light of our now intimate knowledge of the data, we were able to use our categories as the basis for developing the three themes discussed below: women's magazines as a source of information; unrealistic ageing-related content in women's magazines; and women's magazines for enjoyment and relaxation.

## Findings

### *Women's magazines as a source of information*

Many participants reported reading women's magazines as a source of information in relation to fashion, social or family-related issues and health. They were useful for what Louise (age 78) called their 'knowledge value' or to help women keep up with current news and trends. For some women, this use was occasional, as when they read magazines to find new holiday recipes or ideas for an outfit to wear on a special occasion. At the other extreme were women like Sparkles (age 64), a self-described 'information junkie' who mentioned 17 different women's magazines during her interview, or Lucy (age 69), a daily reader who said she read women's magazines because 'I just think you should always be learning, and learning new things'. Some dedicated readers treated magazines as 'reference' works and detailed a methodical approach to reading, annotating and carefully



filing articles for future use. For most women, and even though they also often acknowledged that magazines could be a source of enjoyment and relaxation, women's magazines were important for the practical information they contained.

Participants sometimes read magazines for ideas on how to dress. Some sought inspiration for a specific occasion. Thus, Beyoncé (age 64) read fashion magazines before a European vacation to 'find out what they might be wearing over there' so she would not 'look horrible'. Others read magazines for more general fashion inspiration, even if they were not wholly satisfied with how the fashions were displayed. This was the case for Sparkles, who expressed her dislike of the magazines' over-reliance on younger models, saying, 'just because we're older doesn't mean we can't dress half-decent if we choose'. Janet (age 69), who described herself as struggling with her weight, similarly revealed how she resented the pressure to be thin in magazines, criticising them by saying 'we got not to address it [*i.e.* weight, as a problem], but dress it'. Nonetheless, women's magazines have helped her to dress well: 'not all in black and not blimpy. You gotta be fashionable. I always get told ... "Wow, do you ever look sharp."' Echoing scholarly assessments of the invisibility of older women in magazines (Twigg, 2010), Virago said that this did not stop her from reading the magazines, which she keenly read in relation to her love of fashion. She reported noting the styles and colours in the magazines and reimagining them for her '70-year-old self'. Recognising that older women are not only invisible in magazines but also in society at large (something she mentioned several times), magazines nonetheless helped her to challenge such marginalisation: 'Style for me is a way of communicating I'm not invisible.'

Overall, the fashion information in the magazines helped the women know how to dress, enabling them to be confident in their sartorial choices in order to look 'sharp' instead of 'blimpy' or 'horrible'. While communicating their awareness of the limits of fashion coverage in magazines, and in line with Twigg's (2012, 2018) assertion, these participants also used magazines to counter age-based marginalisation and to help them participate appropriately in the mainstream via style. In this way, older women's use of magazines to present themselves as well-dressed and in line with fashion trends holds the potential to counter negative stereotypes of older women as out of date and unstylish (Lövgren, 2013).

Similarly, participants sometimes commented that they found magazines useful to, as Connie (age 61) said, 'keep [one's] finger on the pulse' in other ways. As Caroline (age 59) elaborated, magazines help her to stay in touch with 'current events, to kind of know about things that are happening now. What's in and what's not in'. Hence participants sometimes said they read magazines to be able to relate to the younger generations or to be informed conversationalists. Pokey (age 67), for example, explained why she read magazines, like her newspapers, cover to cover:

It's like I have an addiction to reading. I read every word ... So, even sports, which I don't care about, I still read it 'cause I go well, someone might want to talk about [it] ... I just wanna be aware of what's going on.

Sometimes the participants read women's magazines for activities or advice relating to (their grand)children and to gain a more contemporary perspective on child

rearing. Here, Kaydee (age 62) pointed out that magazines help to shore up her authority when discussing such issues with her daughter. She talked about clipping out relevant articles ‘cause she wouldn’t believe me if I told her, so I’d have to prove it to her’. Similarly, Virago noted that the ‘research’ in magazines is a resource to counter challenges to her authority to speak on a subject:

maybe I’ll pay greater attention [to research studies in magazines] because I like to brag that I know. Like if somebody said, ‘well what are you basing that on?’ Well [I could say], ‘A research project.’

In these cases, participants were not so much using the practical information in magazines in relation to consolidating their identities within the household sphere (Hermes, 1995). Instead, they were using magazine content to better prepare themselves for interactions outside the home, consciously deploying it to signal their competence in conversations or claims-making about parenting or other issues.

A similar dynamic occurred in reference to the health information in women’s magazines, which several participants mentioned as a motivation for reading the publications. Sometimes the information in magazines was discussed in relation to the women’s own health problems, such as Belinda’s (age 57) and Bunny’s (age 76) newly diagnosed diabetes. Other times the women reported reading magazines for general information about diet and healthy lifestyles, with some women particularly seeking alternative or natural health information. Notably, and similar to the way that information from women’s magazines was used in conversations about contemporary issues or parenting, health information in the publications also formed the basis for knowledge-based interactions with others. Hence Seeker (age 74, who tellingly chose her pseudonym in reference to her being a seeker of knowledge) routinely purchased *First for Women* for ‘research on women’s health’. As one of the women who treated her magazines as reference works, Seeker spent hours annotating each issue prior to archiving what she found useful. She indicated that this research was the basis for her regular discussions with a niece and her niece’s husband, whom she respectively described as a former health agency employee and a professor in the sciences. Discussing research-related information was clearly important to Seeker, who during her interview was also keen to talk about her graduate studies and non-health-related academic reading.

Other participants, while not drawing upon the same cultural capital as Seeker, nonetheless took care to signal a discerning perspective on the health information in magazines. Sometimes they commented on the use of scientific studies or the fact-checking process in magazine publishing to indicate this genre was more trustworthy than the internet with its potentially unvetted information.

Arriving at the opposite conclusion about the quality of the information – but also revealing a discerning disposition to the material they read – were women who were sceptical about the magazines’ health information. Especially pointed here was Bunny, who gave the example of

*Women’s World*, where they have those 20 people studies that coffee helps you sleep better or whatever. I read it and I’m thinking ‘how can I discredit this article?’ Like this is baloney. This, this isn’t true. So I’m reading it with that

view of 'convince me'. Usually they don't ... I find so many times when I read these articles you gotta be living in la la land to believe this stuff.

Several scholars have indicated the importance of women's magazines in providing readers with practical or trustworthy health-related information (Oates, 1997; McIntosh, 2014; van den Berg, 2015). Roy (2008) also associates Canadian women's magazines with healthism, a discourse in which health is promoted as an individual responsibility and moral obligation (Crawford, 1980). In this sense, it is plausible that some participants use the magazines to signal what Christensen (2017: 13) labels their 'will to be healthy', a moral imperative for older adults to work at *becoming* healthy. As she indicates, thinking (reading) about health and making an effort to be healthy are just as, if not more, important than actually *being* healthy. Hence Belinda's disclosure of her diabetes is overshadowed by her discussion of buying magazines to seek out appropriate recipes to help control her condition. Christensen's findings that older adults view mediated health information either as a guide to be healthy or with scepticism also corresponds to the two broad orientations detected among our participants.

Still, we see something further in how some participants 'assess and deploy' (Christensen, 2017: 10) health material in the magazines. If one considers the women's interactions with more recognised purveyors of scientific expertise, such as scientist relatives or the university researcher, sharing the health information itself and revealing their analytical disposition (Jackson *et al.*, 2001) towards it are both ways in which the women can position themselves as knowledgeable discussants. In the context of public health insurance in Canada, one would be hard pressed to assert that the participants use the health information as an absolutely necessary substitute for formal medical care. The magazines, however, by facilitating the women's acquisition of natural health knowledge, could be construed as empowering them to counter (at least in their lifestyles) conventional medical expertise (McIntosh, 2014). Even the mainstream knowledge gleaned could be used to equip one to approach a doctor with the appropriate will to be healthy and as an informed patient (MacRae, 2018 has explored how some Canadian women assume they will experience ageism and dismissal from physicians). External interactions with real or hypothetical medical experts aside, the participants' direct engagement with the magazines is also significant. Discerning truth from falsity in health claims or evaluating the editorial process and then sharing their assessments of the quality of the information allows participants to gain satisfaction in their reading that goes beyond what the magazine content alone offers (*cf.* McDonnell, 2014). As we see next, some participants' analytical approach to the magazines' ageing-related content has further relevance to their self-positioning as knowledgeable and discerning readers.

### **Unrealistic ageing-related content in women's magazines**

The previous section discusses participants' engagement with women's magazines on the basis of their content – the information they contained. In this sense, it was noteworthy that most participants did not cite information related to their own ageing or ageing 'well' as a primary reason for reading women's magazines.

When asked directly to comment on how older women and the ageing process were portrayed, a few participants spoke appreciatively of the ageing-related material. For everyone else, the magazines' treatment of ageing was inadequate at best and insulting at worst.

The majority of women expressed dissatisfaction with the inadequate number of older women represented in women's magazines. As Laura (age 62) asked rhetorically, 'what, does everybody die when they're 50?' But the portrayal of older women who could be found in the magazines was also deemed problematic. Frequently criticised was the overuse of younger-looking older models in the magazines, with celebrities such as Jane Fonda and Helen Mirren characterised as representing the extraordinary ideal of ageing being promoted. References to 'perfectly coiffed' or 'wrinkle-free' women were also common. As Elizabeth (age 70) commented: 'I don't think you see too many average-looking seniors in there.' Importantly, the women did not simply note that the magazines' portrayals of older women were unrealistic. Several also associated such portrayals with a pressure to look younger. Matilda (age 68), for example, resented the pressure to 'not look nice, but look *younger*, you know?' Pokey, when asked about the ageing-related messages of women's magazines, was even more blunt but not atypical when she commented: 'Don't [age] ... or avoid [it]. Get a facelift. Get your teeth whiter. Wear makeup. Don't have grey hair. Don't be – what you are.' In making such comments, these women were confirming that they were aware of at least some of the entanglements of youth, beauty and celebrity that scholars have identified in magazines (Twigg, 2012; Dolan, 2014; Fairclough-Isaacs, 2015).

In addition to commenting on the models' appearances, some participants noted the unachievable fitness level or unaffordable leisure pursuits of the older women portrayed. Belinda, for example, recalled one story in which 'this lady was 82 years old and she was jogging 10 kilometres a day or some stupid number'. Interestingly, a couple of the women marshalled arguments similar to those advanced by critics of successful ageing when they noted that the lifestyles or appearances portrayed were out of reach given their physical or financial limitations (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1995; Minkler and Fadem, 2002; Martinson and Minkler, 2006; Rozanova, 2010). As Belinda explained, referencing her disability from a car accident and the pernicious effects medications have had on her body, 'I can't be that person.' Similarly, Bunny observed, 'I mean they show these people who are in a different demographic group than me, maybe financial-wise, maybe appearance-wise. Like you never see them portraying a short fat girl like me as being a senior.' At another point, she asserted that portrayed in magazines are 'people who have money. But we are seniors who don't have money.' As such, what collectively emerged in such discussions was what can be labelled a disposition of rejection (Jackson *et al.*, 2001) *vis-à-vis* the ideal presented in the magazines. The representation of successful ageing identified was not something to aspire to, but instead was assessed as unrealistic or dismissed as 'stupid'.

In this rejection of the magazines' ideal, there was once again a process of discernment and detection (McDonnell, 2014) at work. Several women pointed to the manipulation of images in magazines as being behind the models' wrinkle-free faces. Connie was not the only participant who mentioned the airbrushing of

older women's images in the magazines, but her phrasing is significant when she declares, 'I *know* they're airbrushed.' Connie here is directly positioning 'herself as a knowledgeable reader who understands the logics [*sic*] behind women's magazines' (Ytre-Arne, 2014: 245; *see also* Hurd Clarke, 2011). Some participants claimed that the age of magazine staff members was also related to the unrealistic images of ageing in their pages. Connie thus asserts further knowledge of these magazine operations when she explains that 'the editors, who are likely to be younger, are giving what *they* think is a positive image of ageing'. In Tanya's (age 65) assessment, 'the people who are creating the media are all in their twenties and thirties, and that's all they see'. For Virago, in addition, putting these pieces together is somewhat of a game: 'I try to guess the age of the person writing the article, given the content' and 'I always look at the picture of the editor of the magazine. OK, what age [is she]? I can pretty much predict what the issues are going to be'. Not only are these participants not beholden to the unrealistic images of ageing portrayed, then, but they appear to take some satisfaction from the fact that they are capable of detecting the origins of the false expectations as well. As McDonnell suggests, discerning truth from falsity in the representations is also a means to hold magazine ideals (in this case, of ageing) up for inspection and potential dispute. By articulating a disposition of rejection *vis-à-vis* the unrealistic images of ageing in this fashion, the women are further signalling that they are discerning and knowledgeable subjects and not 'dupes' (McDonnell, 2014: 16–17). As Matilda underscored during a discussion of beauty advice in the magazines, 'we [older women] don't slavishly believe everything we're told'.

Finally, it is worth stressing that when these participants attribute the limited or unrealistic portrayals of older women to staff members' ages, they are drawing upon a contrast to a more accurate knowledge of the realities of ageing based on their own lives and experiences (Ytre-Arne, 2014) – while that is all 'they' see, the implication is that 'we', as older women, know better. Granted Connie, an author who had a background in journalism, sometimes signalled this cultural capital in terms of sharing insider knowledge of the magazine industry: 'the editors are likely to be', she divulged, 'by the time they get their job, they are in their mid-thirties to mid-forties so they are "peak editor"'. But even she dismissed the inadequacy of what she labelled the 'sanitised' advertising images of well-dressed, socialising older adults with a reference to her personal experience, saying about those types of events that 'you know maybe this is happening once a year in *my* life' and explaining, 'we do other things in our sixties and seventies'. Similarly, when Belinda dismisses the unattainability of jogging on the basis of her own physical limitations or Bunny contrasts the magazine images with her own self-image as a 'short fat girl' without money, the authority to judge the magazines resides within the participants' lived realities.

In the previous section, we discussed how interviewees *wielded* magazine contents as the basis for dressing, advising or conversing knowledgeably in interactions beyond magazine reading itself. The information in the magazines helped readers position themselves as informed and up to date in the face of real or anticipated challenges to their competence. Here, however, the opposite dynamic is at play, with participants' social location and experiences marshalled and used in comparison to the magazines in order to legitimate participants' authority to *dismiss* their

contents as related to ageing. In our next section, we explore a final set of relationships between women's magazines, participants' self-positioning as knowledgeable readers and their lives as older women.

### ***Women's magazines for enjoyment and relaxation***

Participants frequently reported that women's magazines were a convenient source of enjoyment and relaxation. In contrast to the participants above who interacted intensively with magazines as information sources or reference works, for these participants magazines were something entertaining to pick up and casually flip through to pass the time while waiting for an appointment or while watching television. Women also talked about reading women's magazines to relax before bed or to spend a pleasant few minutes while drinking a cup of coffee or tea during the day. When women were describing magazine use for enjoyment and relaxation, they tended to emphasise the lack of demands women's magazines placed on their time or attention.

Key to the appeal of women's magazines used in this way was the character of such magazines themselves, which several participants described as 'light'. Sometimes women talked about the physical lightness of magazines, commenting appreciatively that they were portable or easy to hold in one's hands while in bed or on the couch. These comments were in line with Ytre-Arne's (2011a) observations regarding the experiential elements of readers' preferences for consuming magazines in print as opposed to online, also a strong pattern among our interviewees. More commonly, however, women referred to women's magazines as being light intellectual fare. As Susan (age 66) explained:

Just suppose I had a medical or dental appointment and so I think, oh, you know, just light and lively; I'm not looking for any depth here. I just want to be entertained while I'm waiting.

In this sense, women often discussed magazines as something relatively 'mindless' or 'superficial' that they could skim as a time-filler.

Participants who emphasised the intellectual lightness of magazines frequently did so in comparison to books. They commented that women's magazines and their articles were shorter and did not require the concentration or time commitment of a novel or non-fiction work. For some, the superficiality of women's magazines was the basis for an unfavourable comparison. These women stressed that they were 'not big magazine readers' and that they preferred to read books. Beyoncé, for example, indicated: 'Well, to be honest with you, I'm not a real magazine reader. You know, once in a while if I'm done with [my] book then I go to the library and get out [names of several magazines].' Laura, who noted that 'I find the content [of women's magazines] somewhat superficial generally and I would rather read something more in-depth', also emphasised the subordinate status of women's magazines in her reading life. As she commented: '[They] are almost an extra for me. I do a lot of reading outside of magazines so they're just something else, an easy read – sit down for ten minutes, take a look.' Although admitting to the enjoyable elements of reading women's magazines but consistent with their devaluation



of the genre, on occasion these women expressed sentiments similar to Matilda's straightforward assessment that '[women's] magazines are not that important'.

Despite the dismissiveness some women expressed in relation to the superficial format of women's magazines, other women declared a forthright appreciation for their undemanding nature. As Janet commented, in a conversation that referenced both the physical and emotional levity of the genre:

the fact that the articles are short, [is] soothing too because it's not, something, you know that's long. It's easy to read too and it's light, it's not heavy so it's enjoyable to do and doesn't take a long time.

These women liked that magazines did not require the concentration or commitment of a book because of constraints either due to reading environment (e.g. on a plane or on a patio, both of which were identified as settings prone to interruption) or their short attention spans as readers (e.g. as a personality trait or temporarily while undergoing chemotherapy). Whether women's magazines fared better or worse in comparison to books, however, the participants commenting on the lightness of the genre made an explicit connection between the less-demanding characteristics of women's magazines and the purposes for which they read them.

Previous studies have noted similar perspectives among their readers, with Hermes (1995) referring to the 'easily put down' repertoire and Jackson *et al.* (2001) identifying a discourse of 'surface and depth'. Hermes' analysis is linked to her assertions about the genre's essential lack of meaning, which appear to correspond to some of our participants' implicit and explicit assessments that the magazines are 'not that important'. Nonetheless, we find the distancing disposition of Jackson *et al.* (2001: 136, 180), in which some participants took care to emphasise that they did not really read magazines, to be more salient here. This distancing reaction allows for the ambivalence that women express when they discuss enjoying magazines that they may recognise are culturally devalued (Moeran, 2015; see also McDonnell, 2014). Some participants' distancing themselves from this genre and declaring their preference for more serious reading matter speaks to a certain self-portrayal, perhaps especially in the context of a research interview where they might be aware of the contrast between the 'serious' credentials of the researcher and presumably less than serious subject discussed (Jackson *et al.*, 2001; Hurd Clarke, 2003). For some women, then, it is not the reading but the talking about the magazines in this way that is significant in the consolidation of identity. Here, the participants' concern about observers' presumed judgements of their pastimes can be assuaged through their assertions that they are able to match genre with occasion: they know what and when the magazines are good for. In other words, both what women say they like and dislike about magazines may relate to how they want to present themselves (Ytre-Arne, 2014).

Regardless of whether women's magazines' lack of depth was embraced or dismissed, these participants all ascribed a certain value to the genre in their assessment that sometimes its form was just the right thing to employ at certain junctures in their days. Here, a marked difference to the research on younger women and magazine reading emerges: when the women in our study talked



about reading women's magazines for relaxation or an enjoyable break, they generally did not indicate that they did so in contrast to otherwise busy days (*cf.* Ytre-Arne, 2011*b*). This is not to say that the women interviewed had idle lives. On the contrary, some participants continued to work full-time and others gave the impression of calendars full of family and social commitments. Nonetheless, for the women in our study there was little sense of what Stevens *et al.* (2007) depicted as (younger) readers using women's magazines to carve out an escape or some precious me-time from their hectic 'juggling' between work and child care. Some of our participants, when asked how their use of women's magazines had changed over the course of their lives, did recognise that women's magazines once fulfilled that purpose for them when they still had children at home. But perhaps for some in this phase of life, as retired Matilda wryly suggested, there was 'nothing to escape from now'. Matilda's comment underscores that lifestyle is another element of older women's realities that should be taken into account in discussions of magazine reading in daily life: these participants' comments remind us that all women's days and lives are not the same.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to address what is often considered to be the ageist content of women's magazines by asking older Canadian women themselves about this content and about how, when and why they read these publications. Participants provided details, which generally corroborated previous research on women's magazines, about reading magazines for practical information or in moments of relaxation. Yet, they also revealed ways in which they assessed and deployed magazine characteristics and contents (age-related and otherwise) in ways that contributed to, and were informed by, their lives and identities as older women. Granted, participants did not all view or read women's magazines in the same way. Some participants saw them as occasional information resources, some saw them as reference works worthy of close study and some saw them as superficial time-fillers. Most, but not all, critiqued the unrealistic portrayals of what ageing looks like in the magazines. Despite these differences, however, reading women's magazines – and talking about women's magazines – helped many participants to show not only *what they know* (the practical knowledge gleaned from the magazines) but also *that they know* (the importance, proper place and dynamics behind the magazines) in the interview setting and beyond.

Using and talking about women's magazines allowed the participants to bolster and signal a certain competence, to position themselves as knowledgeable and informed on a variety of topics and in multiple interactions, both in explicit reference to the magazines themselves and more generally in their lives. This competence can be enhanced directly by women's magazines, such as when women learned from magazines and were able to 'keep their finger on the pulse' through magazines, or when they used the information in the magazines to benefit themselves or others. Whether corroborating parenting advice given to a daughter, shoring up one's ability to converse with a scientist or interviewer, or enabling one to look 'sharp' and stylish as opposed to 'horrible' or 'blimpy', the way the women in our study framed the place of women's magazines in their lives both enhances

and demonstrates their ability to navigate a world in which their presence, appearance and opinions are often marginalised. Even for those women who declared that magazines were not all that important to them, competence can be conveyed through the women's discerning of truth from falsity in relation to the health claims of the magazines, through parsing the unrealistic representations of ageing in their pages, or through knowing the different or inferior place of the publications in their lives while recognising them as just the right, light genre to keep one amused under particular conditions.

In this paper, we have chosen to refer to our participants as *using*, instead of merely reading, women's magazines. This choice acknowledges but also goes beyond the assertion of Jackson *et al.* (2001: 180) that 'read' may be too strong a word for cases in which individuals simply flick through the publications or glance at them while doing something else, much as our adoption of Christensen's (2017) phrase 'assess and deploy' expands to accompany more than just the magazines' health-related information. Understanding older women as using magazines reveals their agency and analytic abilities in ways that lend a different significance to women's magazines than is sometimes assumed. When these magazines are taken merely as texts, their ageist components can be reasonably seen to contribute to the cultural devaluation of older women. When they are deployed and discussed by older women, as part of their self-positioning as knowledgeable subjects, women's magazines can also be tools to resist that ageist marginalisation.

Granted, there is no guarantee that, despite the dynamics we describe here, the ageism in women's magazines will not at some level be internalised or harmful to older women readers. As others have shown (Hurd Clarke, 2011; *see also* the essays in Ylänne, 2012a), the matter is complicated: older women can be aware and critical of the problematic messages about ageing in women's magazines but at the same time may still feel conflicted, vulnerable and pressured by them. In addition, magazine reading itself is certainly more complicated than we have discussed here. While we have focused on some elements of magazine reading in relation to our participants' self-positioning as knowledgeable subjects, exploring other components of women's magazines and their uses (as related to their aesthetic appeal or fantasy elements, for example) would surely generate additional insights, as would similar research conducted among larger and more diverse groups of women.

Certainly, future researchers could profitably explore issues of magazine usage in relation to racialised older women, a group not represented in our sample. Despite our broad recruitment efforts, only White women responded to our invitation to participate. It is unclear whether the lack of participation of racialised older women in our research is related to the continued underrepresentation of people of colour in most mainstream women's magazines (Covert and Dixon, 2008; Lewis *et al.*, 2011; Hirsch and Cherubini, 2018), but the latter fact alone would suggest that these women's voices need to be heard. Beyond its racially homogeneous sample, another potential limitation of this study relates to the broad and diverse range of titles that can be considered 'women's magazines' (Mahrt, 2012). While many of our participants reported reading the same few high-circulating titles (among others), the overall number of magazines mentioned during the interviews was relatively high and it is unlikely that participants used every one of these

magazines in the same way. Also, and although efforts were made to guide participants to comment on women's magazines in particular, it is possible that some of the uses and roles of women's magazines reported here are not unique to the genre but rather apply to magazines in general.

Another worthwhile line of research would more deeply interrogate the relationships between print and online women's magazine readership among older women. As we have indicated, our participants (in line with Canadian older adults in general), displayed a strong preference for reading magazines in print format. However, in Canada there has been some recent movement towards putting women's magazines online, most notably with *Chatelaine* reducing its print frequency from 12 to six times per year in 2017 (Lewis, 2016). If print production continues to decline and more women's magazines move online (as has occurred in the USA), we would be curious to see if and how older Canadian women's reading preferences would adapt or whether their readership numbers would change. Further, and in the context of a rapidly growing older population that is disproportionately female (Hudon and Milan, 2016), we wonder whether and how this demographic shift might eventually encourage publishers to adjust their content to address the expanding market of older women. On this note it is significant that, unlike in the United Kingdom, for example, there is currently no Canadian magazine catering exclusively to older women. If publishers identify this absence as a need to be filled, the content with which they fill such a magazine itself will also be important to scrutinise from a reader-centred perspective.

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