

Aging “Hot”: Images and Narratives of Sexual Desirability on Television

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Abstract As women age, their sexual desirability is likely to diverge from what is presented as most coveted in American society: youthful, slim but curvy, firm, and fit. Media rarely feature actresses over the age of 50 as leading characters and when they do, they are usually relegated to caretaker or partner roles and they usually conform to gender traditional stereotypes. However, more recently, there have been a few television programs that focus specifically on older women’s sexualities and feature plotlines that center on their desire and desirability. The premise of the program *Hot in Cleveland* is that desirability is in the eye of the beholder. Using a comedic format, the show highlights the tensions between media and celebrity fueled standards for desirability and “real life” desirability. In this paper, based on a close analysis of five seasons of *Hot in Cleveland*, we explore these competing messages about midlife and older women’s appearance and sexualities and the way comic framing both challenges and reinforces dominant narratives of aging.

Keywords Aging · Television · Comic framing · Sexualities · Popular culture · Desire

Introduction

In 1997, Frida Furman wrote, “systematic devaluation of old age and women’s intrinsic worth have serious consequences for the well-being of older women. Inhabiting an older body—being an older body—comes to rob older women of

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respect and public visibility” (p. 167). This dominant narrative of aging paints older women as less desirable, asexual beings (Gravange 2013; Gullette 1997; Tally 2006) and their social worth becomes tenuous (Vares 2009). However, recent research emphasizes that while frequency or nature of sexual behavior may change as people get older, sexual desire and activity continue throughout the life course for many women who have the opportunity for it (Montemurro 2014; Gott and Hinchliff 2003; Loe 2004; Sandberg 2013; Syme 2014; Waite et al. 2009).

Popular culture shapes our ideas about gender, sexualities, and aging by providing scripts or dominant narratives (e.g., Bazzini et al. 1997; Kronz 2016; Meyer 2015; Silverman 2013; Stevens and Garrett 2016; Tally 2006; Vares 2009). As consumers interpret these as truth, media scripts gain influence and subsequently reinforce the standards set out in these narratives (Bazzini et al. 1997). Essentially, they serve as frames or cognitive schema for both the producer (media) and recipient (consumer) (Scheufele 1999). For example, Bland and Montemurro (2015) found that some viewers of the television program *Real Housewives of Atlanta* modeled their sexualities after women featured on the show and communicated that seeing confident, sexually open women on television inspired them to feel more sexually self-assured or dress in a way that highlighted their sexuality. Beggan and Allison (2003) noted that *Playboy* magazine influenced male readers’ conceptions of masculinity, shaped expectations about women’s bodies, and inspired sexual curiosity. And, in films like *The Mother, And So It Goes, Something’s Gotta Give*, and *The Banger Sisters* we see older women’s sexualities redefined as vital and important, even if only temporarily and with mixed reviews from viewers (Gravange 2013; Tally 2006; Vares 2009).

Thus, in a culture where aging is equated with declining desirability, media portrayals of sexual allure are meaningful and influential (e.g., Bazzini et al. 1997; Gravange 2013; Lee and Myers Lee et al. 2007; Vares 2009). As narratives are replayed in popular television shows and movies, they begin to assume truth and credibility (Lauzen et al. 2008). The audience and the producers become co-authors in the perpetuation of the scripts, and popular media becomes a “reflection of a culture’s attitudes, beliefs and standards, as well as projections of desired realities” (Bazzini et al. 1997, p. 532) that contribute to societal expectations and beliefs about gender (Lauzen et al. 2008). And alternate media narratives, such as those that show middle-aged and older women as sexually active and appealing, are significant in exposing viewers to different ideas about sexualities and the spectrum of desirability (Montemurro and Chewning 2017; Bland and Montemurro 2015; Gravange 2013; Tally 2006; Vares 2009). Stevens and Garrett (2016) noted that because television informs us about sexualities, looking closely at the way sexual stories are told is critical to making sense of sexualities at large and current conceptions of gender relations. Similarly, understanding and examining cultural narratives about aging and desirability is important, as it allows us to determine whether media depictions challenge or reinforce traditional perceptions of asexual aged individuals. Thus, in this paper, we explore the narrative about desirability of mid-life and older women on a popular television program, *Hot in Cleveland (HIC)*. The concerns presented on the show are likely to mirror those of viewers who negotiate the same images and pressures to maintain a youthful appearance.

As *HIC* falls in the genre of comedy, we use the idea of comic framing (Burke 1937/84) as a theoretical lens for examining the emergent themes. Moving beyond the idea of comedy as genre, which considers convention of content (theme and settings) and form (structure and style) (Chandler 1997), framing provides cognitive schema through which social reality is created and perpetuated. Specifically, the comic frame highlights the flaws of the prevailing social structure while simultaneously suggesting that everyone plays a role in the creation and maintenance of this structure. Such a view posits that humanity is essentially good, and that awareness that leads to action will bring about the necessary changes, inviting all participants to examine their role in both the problem and the solution (Burke 1937/84; Carlson 1986; Meier 2017). Silverman (2013) noted how comic framing works through the use of incongruity. That is, comedy can offset tragedy by making light of difference and thus breaking down barriers or categories separating social “Others” from mainstream society. Similarly, we look at how *HIC* highlights tensions about desirability, aging, and the cultural invisibility of mid-life and older women.

Narratives of Aging and Sexualities

Recent studies on aging identify two dominant narratives: aging as decline and aging as something to be resisted, also known as “successful aging” (Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Katz and Calasanti 2014; Katz and Marshall 2003; Rowe and Kahn 1987). For a long time, decline was the primary approach. Scholars documented declining desire, declining sexual activity, declining attractiveness, and social invisibility for older people (women more than men) in a youth-oriented society (e.g., Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Carpenter et al. 2005; Gott and Hinchliff 2003; Gravanage 2013; Gullette 1997; Montemurro and Gillen 2013; Montemurro and Siefken 2014; Tally 2006; Vares et al. 2007). Beginning around the 1990s, scholars noted a push toward a “successful aging” narrative (Katz and Calasanti 2014; Katz and Marshall 2003; Rowe and Kahn 1987; Vares 2009), corresponding with a general cultural shift toward viewing bodies as “post-human,” which should not appear to age and where sexual decline became rebranded as sexual dysfunction (Katz and Marshall 2003, p. 6). Aided by a booming pharmaceutical industry that increasingly markets anti-aging products and medications to restore desire or enhance sexual performance (Katz and Marshall 2003), there is a drive to halt the natural process of aging and appear younger than one’s biological age. As Katz (1996) noted, old age has become “problematized.” Resisting the appearance of aging becomes a project of old age in order to avoid social and cultural invisibility. Thus, people exercise, take medications, have cosmetic surgery and surgical procedures to alter their appearance, avoid looking their age, and remain appealing. With this new narrative, sex was deemed an integral, healthy part of life and a key element of successful aging (Katz and Marshall 2003) for both men and women. Correspondent with the surge in popularity and use of Viagra (Loe 2004; Vares et al. 2007), not only were older people expected to look younger but to perform as they did when they were younger, too. If one lost interest in sexual intercourse as they aged, they could see a doctor, take a pill, receive hormone therapy—they could

be treated. In other words, older people should and could have sex like younger people.

This focus on successful aging is echoed in popular culture. In the second *Sex & the City* movie (2010), for example, we see main character Samantha Jones, portrayed as in her 50s, apply vaginal rejuvenation cream while sitting at her office desk. On the summer 2017 season of the *Real Housewives of New York*, recently divorced Ramona Singer and single and sexually active Sonja Morgan, also in their 50s, engage in cosmetic treatments and injections to try to maintain a youthful appearance. On the fall 2017 season of the *Real Housewives of Orange County* (2017), we see 42 year old Kelly Dodd, have a surgical vaginal rejuvenation procedure. Having a youthful and desirable body is a key narrative in these shows and the women go to great lengths to fight the appearance of aging. Showing women undergoing surgery or having Brazilian body waxes or Botox is commonplace on the *Real Housewives* series, where the majority of women featured are over the age of 50.

Yet, though the presentation of the importance of sexual desirability among mid-life and older women as commonplace may be seen as progressive and indicative of fluid gender roles, it reinforces value on women’s appearance as measure of her social worth and desirability from the perspective of an imagined “male gaze” (Mulvey 1975). This reflects post-feminist discourses about women’s “freedom” to consume products to increase their self-confidence (Gill 2007, Shifman and Lemish 2011). Furthermore, it highlights contemporary media’s “obsessional preoccupation with the body...as women’s source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling...in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness” (Gill 2007, p. 255).

Framing and Humor

Framing is a symbolic process by which individuals and collectives tell and make sense of societal narratives. Burke (1937/84) provides the idea of a frame as a “structure of symbolism” through which we can better understand human strategies for coexistence. He argues that to act wisely and in concert, humans must use words to name both good and bad experiences in a way that allows actors to take action relative to the experiences (Burke 1937/84). Narrative trajectories are made more complex through temporary symbolic bridging devices “whereby one transcends a conflict in one way or another” (Burke 1937/84, p. 224). That is, they serve as a “higher symbolic synthesis” in which one can expose contradictions. Burke likens social movement throughout history to parallels in literary form, such as tragedy, comedy, satire, and more. Each frame provides a unique way to label movement and create pathways for action.

The comic frame walks the line of debunking social order while existing within the same social order. It highlights the fact that societal “weaknesses lie in societal structures themselves” and that the end goal is to “free society by creating a consciousness of the system, revealing its inherent weaknesses, and preparing an aware populace to deal with them” (Carlson 1986, p. 447). While the tragic frame posits an “enemy” who must be defeated in order to restore social order, within the

comic frame, a clown (also referred to as the fool; generally the protagonist of the story) serves as a vehicle through which the shortcomings of the prevailing social order are exposed. Rather than being a villain, the clown serves as a way for audiences to understand their own relationship to the problem, as they are invited to both empathize with the clown and laugh at them. Clowns, then, provide a way for audiences to understand the issues the character is navigating (Enck and Morrissey 2015; Lewis 2002; Silverman 2013), and hence the problems of social order highlighted by the narrative. Although clowns may be punished in comic frame, this discipline leads to dialogue and eventually the (re)establishment of harmonious relations (Enck and Morrissey, 2015; Lewis 2002).

Humor has long been used as a device through which one can challenge and create meaning by opening a space in which one can critically examine both self and the prevailing social order (Rossing 2012; Silverman 2013; Shifman and Lemish 2011). It helps create meaning around a situation in that it is rarely isolated to a single exchange, but rather, part of a larger context. Indeed, “by holding a fun-house mirror to contemporary culture, humor distorts, exaggerates, and reframes in ways that invite audiences to see themselves and society from new vantage points” (Rossing 2012, p. 46). In so doing, it can serve to build cohesion among members of a group, while at the same time letting others in on the joke.

Popular media can use the comic frame in this way (e.g., Enck and Morrissey 2015; Kronz 2016; Lewis 2002; Meier 2017; Silverman 2013). As Silverman found, in an analysis of the television programs *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk*, comic framing can be used to problematize or subvert stereotypes or labeling of stigmatized groups. By mocking or exaggerating stereotypes about homosexuality and Jewishness, she noted that *Will & Grace* “comically corrects the tragic frame of invisibility” (2013, p. 268). Shifman and Lemish (2011) noted how shared jokes on the internet use the comic frame to reinforce traditional gender differences and stereotypes, despite a post-feminist discourse of equality. In another example, the television show *Orange is the New Black* uses comedic encounters of the protagonist to offer viewers a critical view of contemporary race relations and the penal system in the U.S. (Enck and Morrissey 2015). And Kronz (2016) found that depictions of gender transgressions were much more likely to be portrayed comically than dramatically in mainstream films, using characters that fit the clown role. These characters cross-dressed as a means of deception rather than expression of gender identity. By mocking or exaggerating gender transgressions (e.g. cross dressing, sexy older women), they are simultaneously introduced, de-constructed, and policed. The comic frame allows for calling attention to socially invisible or marginalized identities, such as the sexual older woman. Through close analysis of the first five seasons of *HIC*, with a focus on the sexual desirability of the four lead characters, we seek to understand how, via comic framing, narratives of aging are introduced, de-constructed, and policed.

Method

Hot in Cleveland premiered in June, 2010 on the TV Land network, with 4.75 million viewers. The series ran for six seasons, through 2015. *HIC* tells the story of three friends from Los Angeles in their late 40s and mid-50s. They are a soap-opera actress (Victoria Chase, played by Wendie Malick), an aesthetician (Joy Scroggs, played by Jane Leeves), and a writer (Melanie Moretti, played by Valerie Bertinelli). These women end up in Cleveland when the plane they are taking to Paris makes an emergency landing there. In Cleveland, they discover that men desire them and are sexually interested in them in a way they had not been in Los Angeles. Thus, they ultimately decide to stay because the attention they are getting from men makes them feel “hot.” They rent a house that comes with a caretaker (Elka Ostrovsky, played by Betty White). However, it is difficult for them to adapt to this “real” world and they remain, throughout the series, chasing youth and trying to age “successfully.”

This paper is based on narrative analysis of five seasons of *HIC*. In order to get a comprehensive picture of narratives of aging and sexual desirability, we watched and analyzed all episodes of seasons 1–5 (with the exception of 3 “clip shows,” which aired in season 2–4). The total sample was 101 episodes (season 1, 10 episodes; season 2, 21 episodes; season 3, 23 episodes; season 4, 23 episodes, season 5, 24 episodes). Each episode ran approximately 21 min.

The first author watched all episodes in season 1–3 twice; first to become familiar with the show and the characters and to take notes on and transcribe dialogue regarding images of women’s desirability and aging. On the second round of viewing, both authors watched the pilot together to discuss general show themes and coding strategies. Although we approached the data with the intent of identifying narratives about aging and desirability, we were open to emergent narratives and themes. Therefore, we utilized Strauss’ and Corbin’s (1998) grounded theory method of asking questions and making comparisons, which allows for the uncovering of meanings, properties, and dimensions that are embedded in the text. Such comparison lays the foundation for analysis, rather than description, of the phenomenon being studied (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Together, we determined we would examine text related to sexual interactions, desirability, and desire; and then created a baseline of what behavior/dialogue constituted these terms. Following, we each coded the remaining 9 episodes of season 1 and first 16 episodes of season 2 independently, again meeting to check mutual understanding of what constituted sexual interactions, desirability, and desire in the show. Afterward, the first author coded seasons 4 and 5, and the second author coded the rest of seasons 2 and 3. Coding entailed taking notes on scenes depicting sexual interactions, comments about desirability, and comments about desire. We then transcribed dialogue related to the themes of aging and attractiveness and narratives of desirability, noting how dominant narratives of aging and sexual appeal were rejected or reinforced.

Through this inductive approach, we identified a dominant narrative in the storylines of the juxtaposition of “real” versus “fake” women and a focus on “successful aging” versus aging “naturally.” Based on our familiarity with the data,

we decided that the comic frame would be an appropriate interpretive lens through which to analyze the emergent themes, as it acknowledges “the consubstantiality between enemies or supposed opposites” with an ironic awareness (Hatch 2016, p. 99) that allows for both identification and correction of issues in the prevailing social order (Carlson 1988). We then analyzed the overall series narrative and the coded text in terms of the comic frame, looking specifically at how the text both critiqued and embodied existing women and aging narratives.

Results: Framing Desirability and Aging

Throughout the series, both concern with women’s “successful aging” and fears of aging as decline were apparent. On the surface, *HIC* mocks this narrative using comic framing, making Joy, Melanie, and Victoria’s mission to remain youthful and “hot” the foundation of humor of the show. This is set up in the first episode. When the women embark on the plane to Paris, they find Melanie’s ex-husband also boarding with his young fiancé. Melanie exclaims, “I haven’t even on gone on a date yet and he’s taking his fiancé to Paris. And she’s so young! She’s half my age.” Victoria replies, “That isn’t even that young.” Melanie then says, “My fake age!” Shocked, Victoria cries, “Oh my god, she’s a child!”

In this scene Melanie is differentiated from her “replacement” by age. The fiancé is described primarily by her youth, which the other women note with both scorn and envy. Also, we see a fixation on the importance of youth in Melanie’s use of a “fake age,” which is a recurring storyline in the show. Passing for younger is consistent with the narrative of successful aging (Katz and Marshall 2003). Throughout the five seasons we analyzed, only Elka is identified as being a specific age (88, during the first season, Betty White’s actual age). The women go to great lengths to conceal their age—including lying about their age to dates (because they think men will not be interested in them at their actual ages) and all celebrating their birthdays on the same day so they do not have to call attention to getting older or being older than each other (e.g., episodes 1.3, 2.13, 3.17, and 5.24). In episode 2.13, for example, the L.A. women all pretended to be turning 42, though played by actresses who were 50 (Jane Leeves), 51 (Valerie Bertinelli), and 60 (Wendie Malick) at the time that episode aired. And in episode 3.9, Joy dates a blind man who, when she learns he is 22, she tells she is 26. In this episode, she discourages him from getting corrective surgery to restore his vision because she does not want him to see her and realize how much older she really is.

Place, Youth, and Beauty: Los Angeles Versus Middle America

The double bind of beauty and aging standards is portrayed through comic cultural juxtapositions. One of the primary juxtapositions is Los Angeles vs. Cleveland, which is used to frame narratives of desirability. Los Angeles, a place often criticized for being manufactured or “plastic,” plays heavily into the narrative of the show. This thus establishes a dichotomy of “real” (aging naturally/aging as decline) versus “fake” (resisting aging/successful aging) that sets the stage for viewers to see

the characters’ efforts as both flawed and relatable. As such, the framing provides a way for the viewer to both laugh at, and acknowledge the reality of, the situation they are in and their subsequent efforts to remain desirable as they age. The comic frame holds reality up against standard (Enck and Morrissey 2015). While “Hollywood” beauty is typically the (unattainable) standard against which women are measured, using the comic frame, this is flipped and Hollywood standards appear flawed as the main characters repeatedly put themselves and others at risk to maintain them. That Elka is portrayed consistently as the most desired by men and least likely to engage in attempts to fight aging, underscores resistance of the successful aging narrative. In this way, comedy acts as correction of this narrative, by noting that women who go to great lengths to maintain a youthful appearance are frequently not rewarded by what they appear to want—the attention of men. Yet, this simultaneously reinforces the stereotype that in order to feel desirable or contented women need validation from a man and/or a relationship.

In the first episode, as the women go to a bar in Cleveland while waiting for a new flight to Paris, we see this city is framed in contrast to Los Angeles. As they enter the bar they notice men observing them approvingly. The following dialogue transpires:

Melanie: Why are the men looking at us like that?

Victoria: I get recognized a lot, but this is different.

Joy: I remember that look—it’s desire!

Melanie: They’re looking at us. In L.A., they look past us.

Joy: I feel hot. Like they are undressing me with their eyes and not finding Spanx.

Victoria: To think, we spent all that time trying to look ten pounds thinner and ten years younger and all we had to do was crash-land in Cleveland.

Melanie: Where all the men look like real men and the women look like real women.

Victoria: And everyone is eating and no one is ashamed.

In this scene, the women are presented, presumably for the first time in a long time, with the “real” world, the one likely more relatable to the majority of viewers than the “fake” world of Los Angeles. The comic framing of this scene encourages viewers to both identify with the women’s concerns with aging and feeling attractive (e.g., Melanie’s “They’re looking at us!”) while also laughing at their idealization of the quest for thinness and youth (e.g., Victoria’s “Everyone is eating and no one is ashamed”). However, it also privileges the male gaze (Mulvey 1975). The women look the same as they did in L.A.; yet, they feel a boost of confidence when they feel men regarding them with desire. In this way, even though they are mocked for their efforts to fight aging and appear attractive, they are also socially rewarded as they stand out in Cleveland and receive a lot of attention from men (even if it rarely yields a relationship).

This narrative continues throughout the series. For example, in episode 4.11 the women go to a spa on a weight loss retreat where they are supposed to fast the whole time. Humor comes from scenes such as Melanie, because she is so famished, hallucinating that one of the park rangers is her boyfriend and making out with him,

and Joy and Victoria thinking they witnessed a murder because they could not see straight from hunger. When Victoria tells a staff member they are there for the “Girls Gone Hungry package,” he replies, “Let me guess, you’re from L.A.?” Elka replies, “They just moved here to get laid.” This marks Los Angeles as a place of vanity and obsession with thinness but also Cleveland as a place where the women stand out as more desirable than other women peers because of their pursuit of successful aging. So, even though the successful aging narrative is resisted on HIC, the importance of women’s body work and the beauty of the L.A. women are still validated, even if through an ironic lens—that is one in which writers and producers can “present titillating and sexist images of women while suggesting that it was all a deliberate and knowing postmodern joke” (Gill 2007, p. 110).

As in the first episode, throughout the five seasons we studied, we found a consistent paradox where the main characters are both shown as adhering to narratives of youthful beauty/sexual desirability *and* where these narratives are mocked and challenged by their ironic and coming framing. In other words, *HIC* both celebrates and accentuates older women’s desirability, but does so using characters who are shown as obsessed with successful aging. They are constantly trying to look and act younger to stay “hot” and desirable by men. As such, these women are well aware of the “male gaze” (Mulvey 1975) and focus hyper-vigilantly on trying to appeal to imagined men onlookers. For instance, in episode 4.5, when Victoria’s daughter asks Joy how she feels about men approaching her since moving to Cleveland, Joy replies, “Definitely boosted my confidence. But if I get rejected here, I know it’s not because of my age. It’s because of my personality, and that feels good.” Joy’s clownish comment—her appearance is more important than her personality—suggests that chasing youth to this extreme is a laughable pursuit.

One of the best examples of the contrast between Cleveland and Los Angeles/narratives of aging “naturally” and aging “successfully” is episode 3.4, entitled “Happy Fat.” In it, after neighbors catch their husbands ogling Melanie, Joy, and Victoria, the L.A. women give them makeovers with the intention of making them more desirable to their spouses. The episode starts with Kim, a neighbor, chasing Joy into the house with garden shears, saying: “Where is she, the one with the legs?... You bent over and picked up the mail. Don’t you know there are children in the neighborhood? Children whose fathers water the same patch of grass for 45 min waiting for you to come pick up your mail.” She continues: “It’s all of you. You move into this neighborhood with your Hollywood hair and your gorgeous clothes... It’s no wonder our husbands stare.” She then asks them to give her a makeover so that she can be more like them, so that her husband will, “pin me up against that shower wall like he used to, and not just because we can’t both fit in there together anymore.” This exchange sets the L.A. women up as sexy and alluring, and the Cleveland women as lacking in that area. Melanie, Joy, and Victoria are quite pleased to hear the neighborhood men are admiring them—that in spite of being in their 50s, they are eye-catching. Clearly, in their minds, they have aged successfully if they are still garnering attention from strangers. Again, this is the allure of the “real world” of Cleveland, where despite the fact that they are middle-aged, they are still seen as “hot.” The men’s reactions to them reinforce

their desirability, not just on the show, but also to viewers. Even if their pursuit of beauty and successful aging is mocked, the effect is validated.

As the episode progresses, however, through the comic framing of the situation, the roles are reversed, and the L.A. women are shown as shallow and undesirable. For example, the L.A. women set up three departments for the makeover: hair and makeup, diet and culture, and exercise and self-loathing. When the Cleveland women complete their first weigh in, they are celebrated for losing weight, and asked to make a declaration. The first says, "My arms are so sore I haven't been able to hug my kids all week." The second, an emergency services worker, said, "I did my hair the way Joy told me, which made me a couple of hours late for work. So a few 911 calls went unanswered. But the cute Starbucks guy winked at me and gave me a free pastry, which I of course chewed and spit out." Both statements were met with applause by the L.A. women. The third neighbor is asked how she feels and responds, "I don't know. Shaky, cranky..." To which Victoria replies, "I think the word you're looking for is happy." These statements evaluate the importance of L.A. standards of beauty against being able to take care of one's kids, do one's job/save lives, and have good health.

Rossing (2012) says that polysemy characterizes humor. In this episode, "important" takes on multiple meanings, and through comic framing, the audience is invited to understand which meaning is privileged. The humor comes from correcting the L.A. women for their focus on beauty and thinness above all else, effectively undermining the importance of *working* to look sexy in comparison to real responsibilities. In the end, the Cleveland women realize they were more desirable before their makeovers. During their final makeover session, their husbands burst into the house, and proclaim, "We want our old wives back." As the women leave with their husbands, clearly happy to be done with the makeover, Kim thanks Melanie, Joy, and Victoria, saying, "All we wanted to know was that our husbands didn't want you. And we got that." This underpins the idea of the L.A. women as superficial and trivial for their obsession with their appearance and thus resists the narrative of successful aging as necessary for mid-life and older women in the "real" world. It also supports the idea that being in a relationship, particularly as a middle-aged heterosexual woman, trumps looking sexually alluring in a conventional way. The audience is left with the message that as attractive as the L.A. women are, all of them are single. So, while correcting the successful aging narrative, the idea that relationships and sustained attention from men serve as affirmation of women's worth remains unchallenged.

A subplot within the episode has Elka following the advice of the L.A. women and lying to her new boyfriend about her age by pretending to be 77 (13 years younger than her actual 90 years old in season 3), which results in her participating in a series of risky activities to prove how "up for anything" she is. In the end, Elka tells her boyfriend the truth about her age, and he is fine with it. As a result of this experience, Elka tells the L.A. women, "You girls should accept the way you are. You should stop lying about your age, and you should eat." Although the women contemplate it, they decide that standing out makes them special. Joy says, "We're happy with being ourselves. We just have to find men who like us the way we are. Men whose dream it is to marry a nightmare." Elka's comment, coupled with Joy's

conclusion, simultaneously reinforces and undermines the parting statement of their neighbor, as well as the idea that the end goal of being desirable is to secure a man. Vis a vis the dialogue between Elka (the comic foil) and Melanie, Joy, and Victoria (the clowns), the audience is shown a crack in the idea of successful aging at all costs and invited to wonder what “accepting themselves” would mean relative to the stereotypes that the women inhabit as a result of being cast as the Other. The audience is invited to laugh *with* them at the idea of rejecting stereotypes that they, themselves have presumably encountered, while laughing *at* them relative to Joy’s comment.

Goltz (2007) offers that the comic frame moves past binaries (e.g., either/or, us/ them) and opens up the possibilities of both/and. Through the comic frame, viewers are invited to connect with and question the inherent differences in what it means to be desirable according to popular aging narratives, and see that neither is ideal. Bridging the gap between dichotomies is also offered when we meet Elka’s twin sister, Anka (episode 3.19). Anka was played by Joan Rivers, who was well-known for getting frequent plastic surgery. Elka and Anka are portrayed as two sides of the same coin, taking opposite positions on several popular arguments, including “Edward v. Jacob” (a popular debate over most desirable lead male character from the movie *Twilight*) and “Indians v. Reds” (two Ohio baseball teams); but with the same no-nonsense, biting personality. When Elka opens the front door and sees Anka for the first time in forty years, they say in unison: “You look terrible.”

Elka: What have you done to our face?

Anka: Me, what about you? Natural aging! It’s disgusting.

Elka: Where’s the famous Ostrovsky neck freckle? You had it removed!

Anka: Oh, please. After five facelifts, it’s on my forehead.

Although each one criticizes the other’s appearance, they are both contented with their own approach to aging. Elka has aged “naturally” and is happy with her appearance and found attractive by men. Likewise, Anka is satisfied with her surgically altered appearance and status in life.

These examples illustrate how the show walks the line between dominant aging narratives. Through the comic frame, the viewer is invited to understand that the standard definition of beauty, embodied by the L.A. women, is not the only or best way to age and be desirable. However, because the L.A. women are relatable through their foibles and because they are portrayed as sexy, the successful aging narrative is not altogether dismissed. We next explore how *Hot In Cleveland* negotiates these tensions by examining the L.A. women as “clowns,” and Elka as their comic foil.

Hollywood Clowns

Melanie, Joy, and Victoria serve as “clowns” in the *HIC* narrative—women so fixated on remaining youthful and desirable they will do whatever it takes, no matter how ridiculous or risky. In the comic frame, the clown both embodies problems of the social order and offers an entryway for viewers to feel a kinship with the character whereby we realize everyone contains the same clown within (Carlson

1988, p. 312). Melanie, Joy, and Victoria's connection to their audience comes in the form of their desire to stay desirable. In a culture that emphasizes youth and sexual allure and encourages women to fight aging (Katz and Calasanti 2014; Rowe and Kahn 1987), the L.A. women on *HIC* provide enough common ground for viewers to connect with their concerns. However, they take it so far that we are encouraged to laugh at them and at the idea of such hyper-superficiality. The Burkean clown is neither hero nor villain, but embodies both simultaneously, subsequently occupying the "in-between spaces" and "gray areas" (Meier 2017, p. 265). It is within those gray areas that the audience can both identify with, and laugh at, the clown.

Their use as clowns is epitomized in episode 5.18, which is an animated episode where the women end up in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, being granted three wishes by Steven Tyler, lead singer from the rock band Aerosmith. With parallels to *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, Joy, Melanie, and Victoria first wish for "eternal youth and beauty." They are given tickets to "Beauty Land," where they pass through sites like "Lipo Mountain," "The River of Botox," and a "glycolic acid fountain" for skin peels. Enchanted, they sing as if they have entered a paradise of anti-aging. As they tour the factory, each becomes mesmerized by a different device or treatment. Though warned that the "Inflatorator" is not quite ready, Joy hooks herself up to a machine that enlarges her breasts and buttocks to the size of very large balloons and she thus floats up in the sky. Melanie sees a machine called "The Modelizer" which transforms one into: "A teenage model, A human coat hanger, The kind that makes fellas say, 'I'd love to bang her.'" Even after being cautioned that it "destroys brain cells," she enters the machine. She comes out looking very thin and young but with the intelligence and verbal skills of a toddler. Similarly, Victoria finds anti-aging pills, "Ever-younger stop-gobbers," and grabs a handful of them. She takes so many that she turns into a baby. The folly of their actions is highlighted in that their wishes to be younger and/or gorgeous are granted, but to their detriment, essentially leaving them completely undesirable or unable to capitalize on their newly developed assets. Their willingness to try anything to modify their bodies and appear younger challenge the successful aging narrative and the cultural mandate for women to engage in body work to appear younger to be more desirable to men. As clowns, their shortcomings are highlighted and they are punished. By suggesting that in order to "age successfully" or avoid decline, the women would have to take on un-human proportions (balloon or coat hanger) and be reduced to babbling babies, *HIC* subverts mainstream narratives by exposing the impossibility of fulfilling them. Through this, viewers are invited to reflexively consider the absurdity of the prevailing aging norms and push for treatments and pills to fight aging, and their own role in the social structure that perpetuates these norms.

At the end of the episode, they realize they loved being "hot" in Cleveland as they were. Joy exclaims, "We want it all back how it was! We've learned our lesson." And Melanie adds, "Instead of chasing after what we don't have, we should be appreciating what we've got." Steven Tyler replies, "As hot as you are, you'd be the least hot women I slept with. Except for you Elka." By singling out

Elka over the L.A. women, this not only reinforces the idea that there is always someone more desirable, but elevates the idea of aging “naturally.”

Elka: The Comic Foil

Throughout the series, the L.A. women are mocked for their obsession with age by their contrast with Elka. Elka, who as noted is 88–93 during the show’s run, is always seen as desirable and sought-after. Elka does not go to the lengths that the rest of the characters do to “preserve” her beauty or assume a more youthful appearance. In this way, Elka embodies an alternate narrative to aging as decline and successful aging; that is, aging naturally. She receives approximately half a dozen marriage proposals and has multiple-episode relationships with five different men during the first five seasons (as well as several one episode dates). Elka often ridicules the other characters for their efforts to resist aging (especially Joy), telling them they “look like hookers” (episode 2.1), or conversely, upon hearing that they are using hair coloring, face masks, and other beauty rituals to “fight the good fight,” tells them “put down your weapons ladies, time has won” (episode 2.3). Elka usually wears casual clothing and often derides the other women for not dressing their age. In this way, Elka serves as the comic foil to the other characters’ clowns: she can successfully navigate beauty and desirability without going to comic lengths or trying to resist the reality of aging. She does not use Botox, rarely participates in their crash diets (with the exception of the spa retreat in episode 4.11) and she is still portrayed as sexually desirable. Indeed, in seasons 1 and 2, she is pursued for marriage by three men. When she chooses to reunite with her previously presumed dead ex-husband Bobby, there is intimation throughout the episode that they are engaging in adventurous and frequent sexual activity (episode 2.1). Elka’s situation stands in stark contrast to Victoria and Joy, who got married to each other after Melanie accidentally “doses them with dog drugs” during Elka’s bachelorette party. The roles are comically reversed as the octogenarian married couple is portrayed as libidinous, while the two middle-aged women bicker like an “old married couple” whose desire has faded and no longer find each other attractive.

Elka also frequently reminds Melanie, Joy, and Victoria that they are not the “young” women they pretend to be and should accept their actual age. For example, in episode 4.3, Joy shows off a new outfit she bought a store that caters primarily to teens and young women. She says, “What do you think? I went shopping at Forever 21.” Elka retorts, “What the menopause barn was closed?” And when the women visit the spa in episode 4.11, when Elka says, “I’m just here to lose a few pounds,” Joy responds, “At your age, who cares?” Elka quickly replies, “Right back at ya.”

Episodes of *HIC* often close with women eating or drinking in the kitchen, reviewing what has happened to them over the duration of the episode. These scenes act as bridging devices (Burke 1937/84) whereby the women reflect on what went wrong and then reify their original sense of self, thus opening up multiple acceptable avenues to exist within the “flawed” social system. As clowns, they are disciplined repeatedly, yet always return to the idea that they should see themselves as fine the way they are. Even within this celebration of the L.A. women’s approach

to aging, Elka often takes a parting shot, undermining their self-satisfying conclusions. Such exchanges can be summed in the final scene of episode 2.3:

Victoria: The crazy things we do for men.

Melanie: You know, for me, it wasn't even about Kirk. I just wanted to feel as fabulous as you guys. Yes, I get jealous sometimes.

Joy: Of me? That's crazy.

Elka: I'll say.

Joy (to Melanie): I'm jealous of you! You're so sexy and adorable. Of course a guy's gonna go for you.

Victoria: Well, I'm jealous of both of you. Those legs, that smile. What guys would choose me?

Melanie: Oh, please. You've got to be joking. You are so glamorous, so gorgeous.

Victoria: Well, that's true.

At this, the women toast each other. Just when the women start to feel a sense of peace with themselves, Elka gets the last word, pointing to the importance of relationships as validating desirability, particularly as women age. She says, “You're all hot. You're all fabulous. You're all alone. See you losers. I've got a date.” Even as the show provides an opening to identify with the L.A. women, Elka's character contrasts their conclusion with the reality of their situation, essentially framing and re-framing desirability. Looking desirable is undermined when no one specific desires them. The premise of the show is that men in Cleveland see them in a way that men in Los Angeles had not, intimating that the end goal of looking desirable is to attract men's attention and companionship. Lauzen et al. (2008) suggest that women are often relegated to the role of “other” in popular media, suggesting that their primary role is to exist to complement the needs of others (in this case, to men's ideals of desirability). However, Elka's consistent attention from men and her closing line underlines the absurdity of their behavior. It suggests that *looking* desirable and *being* desirable are two different things, and that their work trying to be “hot” has rendered them undesirable. This exchange again opens the idea of moving beyond binary categorizations, suggesting that “desirable” and “undesirable” can exist outside of standard definitions, and even outside of the traditional paradigm of men's desire.

Discussion

Close analysis of five seasons of *Hot in Cleveland* reveals that the show both challenges and reinforces dominant images of attractiveness and body image among middle-age and older women. That is, it reifies “sexy oldies” characterizations and the successful aging narrative with its casting of attractive actresses who appear to have fought aging and by presenting characters regarded as beautiful and alluring for their efforts. At the same time, *HIC* mocks successful aging narratives by using the comedic frame to portray the lengths that women go through to appear “desirable.” Aging as decline is only employed as impetus for fighting the

appearance of aging. The women characters in *HIC* face a paradox of empowerment (in that they embody the narrative of successful aging where they each possess control over their bodies, aging, and sexualities) and binding (in that they must conform to narrative of progress if want to be perceived as sexually attractive). Through humor and juxtaposition, *HIC* shows that there are many possible narratives of “desirability” for middle-age and older women, inviting the viewer to insert themselves into the script by way of the protagonists.

Although *Hot in Cleveland* cleverly exposes the challenges and hypocrisies of dominant aging narratives and offers, via Elka and the women of Cleveland, the alternative of aging naturally, considering the show in the larger context of Hollywood, we see that the writers and producers expose this cultural devaluation while still existing within and profiting from it. As popular and attractive female actors, all of whom have been on television since their mid-twenties or younger and therefore have aged in front of the viewing audience, Betty White, Valerie Bertinelli, Jane Leeves, and Wendie Malick enjoy positions of social privilege through which they can offer this critique. They have managed to age “successfully” while in the spotlight, and can now reflexively play this process out on *HIC*. However, even they are still caught in a bind, as they have to maintain a “Hollywood” appearance in order to be on television. Given a Hollywood culture that frequently portrays older female characters as less attractive, friendly, and intelligent than male counterparts and younger female counterparts or renders older women invisible altogether (Bazzini, et al. 1997); *HIC* must walk the line of existing within the very genre it is questioning.

Comedy is used as correction (Silverman 2013). Through the use of post-feminist irony (Gill 2007), we see ideologies about sexuality and aging examined and critiqued—the asexual, culturally invisible older woman is rejected and replaced with women who desire and wish to remain sexually alluring. And, we see successful aging narratives replaced by the idea of aging naturally. Elka’s desirability and frequent pursuit by and relationships with men suggest that going to great lengths to resist the appearance of aging are unnecessary. Rather than serve as evidence of the male gaze (Mulvey 1975), the elevation of Elka reinforces the idea that desirability is in the eye of the beholder. Thus, the comic frame moves narratives of aging past binaries. *HIC* implies that there is really no way to really age successfully unless one accepts themselves as they are, as Elka appears to do. Yet, *HIC* does not challenge the idea that women need a man to be successful or satisfied, despite the emphasis on the women’s relationships with each other and the fact that men are generally peripheral in most storylines. The notion that the three main characters are “hot in Cleveland,” but cannot maintain relationships, suggests that aging “successfully” is not always productive if it does not yield the goal.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Human and Animal Rights This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent This article uses secondary data; therefore, informed consent is not applicable.

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