# Gender and Sexual Identity: Presentations of the 31st Annual SW/Texas Regional Meeting of the Popular Culture Association

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CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING

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This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-2663-4, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2663-1

# When Predator Becomes Prey: The Gendered Jargon of Popular Culture

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## Abstract

Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century the vernacular of popular culture has been bombarded by sexualized terminology. Although these terms are often formed with humorous intent, their staying power and use as cultural descriptive categories is both intriguing and disturbing. Also troubling is the fact that the majority of these new terms, such as puma (a thirty-something female "dating" a younger male), cougar (a forty-plus female "dating" a younger male), and MILF ("mother I'd like to fuck"), are restricted to the female gender alone. This article analyzes the etymology of these terms, their use in popular culture (ranging from reality television shows utilizing them as their namesake or coming of age films utilizing them as their punch line), and their overall reception in mainstream culture.

*Keywords: Gender, Popular Culture, Sexuality, Motherhood, Age, Slang*

It is now commonplace in feminist theory, and, indeed, society in general, to recognize the double standard that has existed and still exists when discussing male and female sexuality. For example, not so long ago men who did not marry were dubbed eligible bachelors, a neutral or even a flattering term, while women were labeled spinsters, a pejorative term. Society disapproves of young, unmarried women who are promiscuous at the same time that it allows (or at least, does not criticize) young men to display their sexual prowess prior to nuptials. And until recent times, older men could date younger women without fear of reproach, whereas

older women who dated younger men were looked upon with disdain.[1] These double standards, it should be noted, are detrimental to both genders.

In the last decade particularly society has witnessed the emergence of this latter phenomenon: the older woman dating a younger man. The media has bombarded viewers with images and stories about celebrities such as actor Demi Moore and singers Cher and Madonna who are in relationships with younger men. Men who date significantly younger women (more than 10 years their junior) have rarely received as much attention or been held up to the same amount of scrutiny; women, however, have been. Furthermore, new terms have been coined to signify this growing trend. Women who are 40 years old and older who date younger men have been labeled cougars, and 30-something women doing the same are labeled pumas.[2]

On the surface, these terms seem innocuous enough. After all, they are just words. In fact, many women feel empowered by these terms because they denote a strong, powerful person. Furthermore, by claiming to be cougars, these women are working against the status quo which states that a woman should date a man older than herself or that her sexuality should be regulated in any way. One negative aspect of the terms, however, is that they put women into a category: that of the predator who is hunting for sexual prey.

Feminists have long argued that women have been placed into either the category of the madonna or the whore. If she is the madonna, according to this philosophy, she is good and pure and travels along the course that will eventually lead her to marriage and maternity; the whore, on the other hand, is the antithesis to this. She has no desire for marriage or children but is rather out for her own sexual fulfillment. Susan Faludi in her 1991 book, *Backlash*, speaks to this type of categorization when she discusses how the 1980s faulted feminists of the 1970s for such so-called phenomena as the "infertility epidemic" and the "man shortage" because, according to the media, the women's movement encouraged women to put career before family. Faludi debunked these myths by arguing that society

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[1] For more on the sexual double standard see also Keith Thomas's seminal text, "The Double Standard" (*Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1959); Elizabeth Reis's *American Sexual Histories* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2001); Angus McLaren's *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1999); Nancy F. Cott's *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (Yale University Press, 1987); and Joanne Meyerowitz's *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Temple University Press, 1994).

[2] An AARP survey from 2003 showed that 34% of single women over 40 are dating younger men.

was in a period of backlash, when negative reactions to the feminist movement were prevalent. Fundamentalist ideology dictated that women could not "have it all."[3] Under this ideology, women were given the directive to choose *either* a career *or* a family, and clearly, conservatives would say, family was the correct choice. This either/or mentality, then as now, was problematic because it pitted these two entities - career and family - against each other rather than taking into account that women simply wanted the same opportunities men had enjoyed for years: the ability to work outside the home *and* still have a family.

Not choosing family over career, according to this ideology, resulted in an "infertility epidemic." In actuality, however, no such thing existed. Faludi cites a 1982 study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that, erroneously, "reported that women's chances of conceiving dropped suddenly after age thirty" (Faludi 1991, 42). After the journal "served up a paternalistic three-page editorial, exhorting women to 'reevaluate their goals' and have their babies before they started careers," (Faludi 1991, 43), the *New York Times*, along with several other magazines and news programs that jumped on the bandwagon, featured these fantastic findings in their headlines. However, as Faludi explains, "every study up until then had found fertility did not start truly declining until women reached at least their late thirties or even early forties" (Faludi 1991, 42). Thus, the "biological clock" scare was proliferated by the media along with the admonition for women to leave the workforce, stay home where they belonged, and have babies.

If the last two decades of the 20th century were backlash years which fostered the fear in women that they would not be able to have children because their "biological clocks" were blaring, so too it seems that "cougardom" may resurrect this fear that women will, once again, veer away from having children and instead opt for a life of debauchery. In addition to this, considering the double standard rife in society that women are meant to be virtuous while men are "naturally" more inclined to exploit their sexual proclivities, this kind of lifestyle might create in women a desire to push for sexual equality. They might forego talk of commitment with their significant other (for which they are often faulted), and instead choose an obligation-free sexual relationship. Hence, another backlash might be eminent.

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[3] This "have it all" mentality of 1970s women (which men enjoyed and women perpetuated) was exemplified in the 1980 commercial for Enjoli perfume. In the ad, a flawlessly dressed blonde woman brags that she can "bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, and never let you forget you're a man." The male voiceover then intones that this is an "eight hour perfume for the 24 hour woman."

In addition to categorizing women, these terms are also potentially damaging for another reason. Women who embrace cougardom as a means to "do what men have always done," that is, seek sexual pleasure for its own sake, often simply flip the problematic binary: instead of the male being the aggressor, they advocate the female as aggressor. Although this restructuring of the sexual power structure may seem empowering to women, in reality this realignment of the subordinate/dominant roles does not work toward sexual equality. While actively playing the role of the cougar/puma may allow women to enjoy a sense of control over relationships that is usually granted to only men, it still perpetuates the cultural myth that relationships must be comprised of one active and one passive participant.

The terms cougar and puma can refer to any woman, single, married, with or without children. But there is another sexualized term, M.I.L.F., that refers specifically to mothers. M.I.L.F. is an acronym for "mom/mother I'd like to fuck," and, like cougar and puma, this term, too, categorizes women. M.I.L.F. is problematic for various reasons. Crudeness aside, it works in a fashion similar to cougar and puma: on the one hand it might be considered empowering because mothers have often been associated with goodness (again, consider the madonna/whore dichotomy). Once a woman is a mother, she is often regarded as less sexual. But this term, through the juxtaposition of mothers with sexuality, might modify this type of thinking.

On the other hand, the word "mom" is not in the subject position. Instead, it is the object of the verb "fuck," which serves to both objectify her and eliminate her agency. Furthermore, if society is accepting of the usage of such a term by *boys*, then society is also accepting, by extension, the likelihood that this objectification of women will continue when these boys become *men*.

Because these newly-coined terms are becoming increasingly pervasive in films, television, and print, it seems imperative to theorize what they mean in/to contemporary popular culture. This paper problematizes these terms through a brief literature review in which the etymology of the terms is traced; through an examination of pertinent media clips, many of them seminal works in regard to the terms; and through a discussion of results from a survey which gauged and analyzed people's reactions to the terms based on demographics.

## Etymologize This: Tracking the Presence of the Three Terms in Popular Culture

According to an April 2010 article in *Parade Magazine*, the term "cougar" originated in the late 1980s at a Vancouver Canucks hockey game. The team coined this term to "describe groupies of a mature vintage" (Hollywood's Hottest Cougar 2010).[4] A 2009 *Fox News* article posits that the word was "originally a derogatory term for older women at bars who would go home at the end of the night with any 'leftovers.'" The author claims that today the term refers to women over 40 who are: "very attractive and in super shape; into working out and staying fit; well-educated and cosmopolitan; confident and empowered, especially when it comes to their sexuality" (Fulbright). However, this positive definition fails to fully conceptualize the term which is now widely-used and wildly defined

Ilona Paris, author of *Hot Cougar Sex: Steamy Encounters with Younger Men,* offers an exhaustive definition of the term, claiming the existence of four major types of cougars: the **"Power Cougar" is "a highly educated woman who needs to be discreet** about her trysts, given that she's often 'busting balls' in the boardroom or hanging with the big guys"; the **"Intellectual Cougar"** is the "sort you'll find reading in a bookstore café, dabbling in philosophical debates or looking to shape society via the media"; the **"Unexpected Cougar"** is a "quiet and demure woman...the sort you'd never expect to seduce someone too young to remember when Madonna was 'like a virgin'"; and the **"Divorcée Cougar" is a woman who has** "just gotten out of a marriage that lasted into the double digits, [and who] is rearing to go and wants zero attachment" (qtd. in Fulbright). Many more varying interpretations of this term can be seen by perusing Urban Dictionary.com, a web-based dictionary of slang words and phrases housing over 4 million definitions for pop culture's terminology. To date, 76 of the 90 entries for the term "cougar" refer to the phenomenon of older women "chasing"/"dating" younger men – the earliest dating back to January 4th, 2003. Although some of them do define the term in a positive light, such as in one poster's acronymic definition: a "cute, older, unmarried, gal aggressively recruiting" men, others return to more disparaging characterizations, defining cougars as "desperate, unattractive 40-something barflies."

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[4] This is according to language expert Patricia T. O'Conner who adds that the term became more popular with the publication of Valerie Gibson's *Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men.*

As was previously stated, cougardom is receiving a great deal of media attention as of late. In November 2009, male readers of the Dear Abby column were invited by the columnist to share their thoughts about the prospect of being hunted by "cougars." One reader explained his stance on the issue:

> Abby, cougars are nothing new. They're simply out of the closet. Men have been called 'dirty old men' for their dalliances with younger women. But older women have quietly involved themselves with younger men for years. As women have become more successful, both in the corporate environment and individually, they have grown bolder in their personal lives. As a 58-year-old man, I look on this as a natural progression of the boomer-born sexual revolution... I don't consider 'cougar' as being predatory, nor do most men and women I know. Our world is changing and evolving, and this is simply another chapter. (Dear Abby)

Why exactly would Dear Abby host a series of columns related to the cougar now when the word (or the person) had been around for so long? Because in many ways the Fall of 2009, the time during which the column was published, could be titled "the season of the cougar" with the launching of the first-ever "cougar cruise" along with the premiere of ABC's sitcom, *Cougar Town* .

On December 4th, Carnival's ship Elation set sail on what was billed as the first International Cougar Cruise. During the advertising period, the *Chicago Sun Times* wrote of this cruise, stating that although "most cougars are north of 40... the cruise is open to Mrs. Robinsons and boy toys of all ages," explaining that "cougars and cubs" would "share the roughly 2000-passenger ship with regular cruise guests," having "their own cocktail parties, dinners and activities" while on board (Rackl 2009). This maiden voyage even included the first Miss Cougar America, who was crowned at the National Single Cougars Convention in Palo Alto, California in the Fall of 2009 (Rackl 2009).

Unlike its more mature counterpart, the puma is not receiving as much publicity as is the cougar. There have yet to be advice columns, sitcoms, or cruises devoted to its conceptualization; however, the puma is certainly worthy of discussion. A puma is, essentially, a cougar in training. In May 2009, *Cosmopolitan* included an article devoted to the puma, titled "The Sexiest New Kind of Woman." The article begins with this extended definition:

> As you know, cougars have gotten a lot of attention lately. But now, a different type of older woman is grabbing the spotlight: the puma. She's 30 something rather than 40 or 50 something. Like the cougar, she is hot,

> has her life together, is fully in control, and has a penchant for younger dudes. But while cougars often date younger men to feel young again themselves, pumas date them because, well, that's just what happens to work for them in their lives right now. (Fahner 2009, 42)

The piece explains that, unlike other 30-something females, pumas are not interested in getting married and settling down; they are more focused on financial independence and careers and are therefore putting off relationships until both are established (Fahner 2009). The logical result: they turn to younger men who, like them, are also not looking for relationships. They reap the psychological benefits of being with men who are "less serious about work and more eager to go out and have fun and (who) are willing to put the woman first" (Fahner 2009, 42). Although *Cosmo* paints a rather attractive portrait of the puma, like the term cougar, puma is often defined in a myriad of ways – some positive, some negative, and some neutral. The earliest definition posted on UrbanDictionary.com dates as far back as February 19th, 2003. This relatively neutral definition contains the gist of those that would follow: "a woman who is not quite old enough to be a cougar, but still likes to date/mate with younger men."

These age-related, gendered terms have been making headlines in recent years, but it is the third term in our research trinity that was actually the first to receive media attention. The term M.I.L.F was first popularized when it appeared in Paul and Chris Weitz's 1999 film, *American Pie*. In one memorable scene, which takes up only 23 seconds of airtime, a group of high school boys gathers around a photograph of one of their friend's mothers, Stiffler's mom (played by Jennifer Coolidge), and a popular culture term is born.

The main difference between the terms cougar/puma and M.I.L.F. is that the latter refers specifically to mothers. Its staying power has been great within popular culture and is largely due to the association of celebrities with this growing fetish (Douglas and Michaels 2004); Hollywood stars like Demi Moore have been granted the sometimes-interchangeable titles of cougar and M.I.L.F., and even the unlikeliest pseudo-celebrities, such as former Vice Presidential Candidate Sarah Palin, have gained reputations for being "hot soccer moms" or M.I.L.F.'s.[5] With all of this attention paid to the sexualization of mothers throughout the last decade, it is not surprising that people have begun theorizing this

[5] The degree to which this particular fetish has developed could easily be seen by surveying the pornography industry, in titles such as "MILF Hunters."

growing trend.[6]

After the origin of this term on *American Pie* (or what many have considered its origin), various definitions began to arise on urbandictonary.com. To date, 133 definitions of M.I.L.F. appear on UrbanDictionary.com, with the earliest dating back to January 2003. The definition that received the greatest number of positive responses was from December 2003. It reads, in part, as follows: "Mothers that a male individual sees as physically attractive enough to want to have sexual intercourse with."

What is problematic about this term is that, first, it focuses on a woman's appearance as being the most important aspect to consider on the sexual desirability scale, as the above definition implies ("physically attractive *enough*..."). Second, it defines women *in relation to* another person. Women have been defined in relation to men throughout the ages (take for example the fact that women often take their husband's name after marriage); now they are defined in relation to children, and even more disturbing, they are defined in terms of how young boys view them sexually. The very term "mom," according to Susan Douglas in *The Mommy Myth*, "keeps us in our place" as it "[defines us] by our relationships to kids, not to adults" (Douglas 2004, 20). A "mom," she continues, "sounds very user-friendly" (Douglas 2004, 20). Douglas attributes this rise in the use of "mom" to Doctor Laura and "Republican pollsters... who coined the term 'soccer mom' in 1996" (Douglas 2004, 19). Further, the term "assumes a familiarity, an approachability that is... patronizing" (Douglas 2004, 19-20). The third issue with the term M.I.L.F. is that it categorizes women as either moms or as sexually attractive women. The fact that the two words "mom" and "fuck" are juxtaposed indicates that rarely are these two terms considered mutually constitutive (otherwise why not simply replace "mom" with "woman"?).

Certainly, it is not only boys and men who are responsible for objectifying women - moms included. Indeed the media and women themselves are responsible as well. Britain, in fact, holds a yearly contest for "Britain's Yummiest Mummy" (which Victoria Beckham won in 2006, and Kate Winslett in 2005). The British term Yummy Mummy corresponds to the American term M.I.L.F., although it lacks the more sexually explicit implications of its counterpart. According to Stephanie O'Donohoe in her article "Yummy Mummies," a "[yummy] mummy has rock-hard abs, manicured nails, and killer highlights. Yummy mummy

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[6] Although articles in newspapers and magazines have been written about the prevalence of these terms, to date, there exists no academic theorization on them.

wears dangerously sky-high heels, low-cut jeans, and designer diaper bags. Yummy mummy's children, who may or may not be considered accessories, are more likely to be clad in a Burberry plaid than in anything that features ducks or bunnies" (O'Donohoe 2006). While this definition does not specifically broadcast that young men would find her sexually attractive, the implication is there.

O'Donohoe examines this phenomenon from a marketing perspective, questioning whether this "generation of mothers, many empowered by careers and consumption, embraced the Yummy Mummy as a means of distancing themselves from an older... model of motherhood focused on drudges." Or, she questions, is it by contrast a "media creation that disempowers mothers" by, on the one hand, urging mothers to be glamorous, but at the same time criticizing them for "being superficial and selfish...so that they have less energy to devote to other personal and political challenges posed by mothering in this era?" (O'Donohoe 2006). As Kristin Maschka of *Mothers & More* observed, "we've created this world where if you pay attention to yourself and you're sexy, you can't be a good mom ... This is part of the ridiculous either or type of boxes we want to put mothers in" (qtd. in O'Donohoe 2006). Once again, it should be noted how women are relegated - and relegate themselves - into neat, but extremely problematic, categories. The either/or philosophy is apparent here, and significant is the fact that women themselves are often complicit in propagating these notions of "good" and "bad" mothering.

## Mediating Predators: Fictional Representations of M.I.L.Fs, Cougars, and Pumas

As stated previously, the term M.I.L.F. spawned from the 1999 teen film, *American Pie*, a film about four teenage boys who make a pact with one another that they will lose their virginity on prom night. The following dialogue from the film is preceded by a close up of a bronze framed portrait of Stiffler's mother, posed seductively and casting a lustful sideways glance over her shoulder and out onto her spectators (the adolescent males objectifying her and the camera itself). As the camera pans out to include the males in the shot, viewers hear the following dialogue:

"That's Stiffler's mom?"
"Yup."
"Shit, I can't believe a fine woman like this produced Stiffler."
"Dude, that chick's a M.I.L.F"
"What the hell's that?"

"M-I-L-F: Mom I'd like to fuck" (Herz 1999).

With his etymology lesson complete, the young man is greeted with machismo asides and laughter as the scene quickly shifts away from the focus at hand to yet another sexual escapade, the focus of much of the film.

The placement of this term in a film such as *American Pie* indicates its humorous intent. But at the same time, it is apparent from this brief scene - which introduced society at large to the acronym - that the term signified the sexual objectification of women by young men.

The movie industry was not the only one to begin capitalizing on this new terminology and the corresponding fascination with the "sexy mom." In 2003 an American band, Fountains of Wayne, released a hit single, "Stacy's Mom." Soon after, the fetish of the M.I.L.F. quickly found its place within the music industry. The video begins at a school crossing, highlighting from the outset the point of view of the song's adolescent narrator. The opening words of the song echo the title, as does the chorus of the song, beginning with the soon-to-be popular lyrics: "Stacy's mom has got it going on" (Fountains of Wayne, 2003). As these lyrics begin, the camera pans away from the school bus stop to "Stacy's Mom," played by model Rachel Hunter. If the lyrics alone are not an indication of the song's sexual focus, the close up of Stacy's mom, as she jumps out of her red convertible wearing a short, white tennis skirt and flaunts her bronzed thighs, conveys the message. The premise of the video is simple: a teenage boy uses his friendship with a peer, Stacy, to have the opportunity to be close to her attractive mother.

The video does not mask this blatant objectification of the mother; in fact, it draws attention to it. One scene in particular, just one minute into the video, shows the boy floating in Stacy's pool on an inflatable lounge chair as he watches Stacy's mother undress through the blinds just feet away. As the lyrics "I'm not the little boy that I used to be; I'm all grown up now, baby, can't you see" are sung, the boy uncaps the soda bottle Stacy has just handed him (Fountains of Wayne, 2003). Stacy's mom unhooks her bra, and the soda bottle, strategically positioned in the boy's lap, erupts as a flagrant indication of his desire. The chorus continues from that point: "Stacy's mom has got it going on. She's all I want and I've waited for so long. Stacy can't you see, you're not the girl for me. I know it might be wrong, but I'm in love with Stacy's mom" (Fountains of Wayne, 2003). These types of gratuitous sequences continue throughout the duration of the three and a half minute video, from cleavage-filled shots of Stacy's mom bending over to clean up a mess on the kitchen floor to her receiving a massage in only a towel in the backyard. The video

ends with two fantasy sequences in which Stacy's mom participates in this sexual objectification, dancing on a stripper's poll in the middle of her living room floor and crawling across the kitchen table as if on a stage in fishnets, heels, and black lingerie. The next fantasy sequence begins with her getting out of the pool in a slinky red bikini and then transforms into a shot of her walking through the rain on the verge of disrobing in front of him. This last scene plays through his mind as he masturbates in Stacy's bathroom, an act that is interrupted when Stacy opens the door and sees him, ultimately causing her to believe that his actions stem from his desire for her and not her mother.

Hedley, a Canadian pop rock band, followed in the footsteps of Fountains of Wayne with the release of their song, "Don't Talk to Strangers" in 2009. "Stacy's mom" effectively assigns agency to the boy, allocating the object position to Stacy's mom by way of the teen boy's fantasy. "Don't Talk to Strangers," on the other hand, assigns agency to the cougar figure: but not without a price. As the subject of the action, she is also demonized as she aggressively and violently pursues younger (and seemingly non-willing) males. The song opens with the lyrics:

> She was a bottle blonde;
> She had her 7's on.
> When I think about it now,
> Just a cougar on the prowl.
> She was hotter than hell,
> Had me under her spell.
> Got that ass doin' yoga,
> Didn't care that she's older.
> Got off of the stage,
> Ended up at her place.
> We were burning up the bed,
> Fire needed to be fed.
> Mornin' sun hit her face,
> Maggie May showed her age. (Hedley 2009)

Although the lyrics indicate desire from the male singer's standpoint, the video images portray violence rather than simple lust. The video opens with a 40-something woman retrieving groceries from her clichéd minivan, walking into her classic suburban home, only to toss her coat onto a teenage boy tied up in her closet. The next scene reveals another male prisoner, this one chained to her living room chair with a gag in his mouth. The video focuses on the woman's brutal handling of her captives. She slaps the chair-bound male after the line "Maggie May showed her age," indicating that any mention of age is highly offensive. She then

retreats into the kitchen, turns on the television, and the video reverts to the band singing the following:

> And I remember what my Mama said:
> Don't talk to strangers;
> Don't do all your thinking with your little head.
> Like mama said, just like mama said,
> My mama said:
> Don't talk to strangers,
> Just wrap it up so you don't wind up dead.
> Like mama said, just like Mama said
> My mama said. (Hedley 2009)

The video resumes with a montage of scenes showing more imprisoned males: one is tied up in her pantry; the lead singer is performing from a missing persons' advertisement on the side of a milk carton; and another young man is tied to her headboard in the bedroom. As these scenes unfold the following lyrics are in sync with the actions:

> She likes 'em nice and young;
> She likes 'em fresh and hungry.
> Got that fire in her eye,
> Lets you try her on for size.
> Show you a trick or two,
> To teach you something new.
> Full of Bacardi and Botox,
> She's forty and so hot,
> The light of the day,
> Had somethin' different to say.
> My head started to spin,
> When I saw her son walkin' in.
> I'll bet he felt like a fool,
> 'Cuz I knew him from school. (Hedley 2009)

Out of all of these abusive/erotic encounters with the male figures in her home, the scene with the boy tied to her headboard is the most violent. As she enters this scene she changes out of her sweater set and jeans, revealing a sexy black negligee. She then procures a meat cleaver from her bedroom bureau, walks over to the bed and strokes her weapon. In the next scene she is seen leaning over the young man with battery jumper cables, and in the next she is ripping off his t-shirt. Ripping off his "wife-beater" shirt (which, as the name implies, signifies control) indicates that she is now the aggressor. As this occurs the boy confined to the bed repeats the following lyrics: "Hey pretty lady, it's crazy, you're almost

twice my age. I wanna dance on your body the way I shake it on stage" (Hedley, 2009). The parade of captive men is not finished, however. As she freshens up (after the sexual encounter, viewers assume), the camera focuses on another boy tied up in the shower. The video ends with her opening her mini-van trunk to reveal two teenage male corpses piled under sports equipment. Although the coupling of sex and violence was present throughout the video, this last scene further serves to vilify the figure of the M.I.L.F. Even more than the other terms analyzed here - cougar and puma - the M.I.L.F., in this video's depiction, is a predatory creature – one to be feared.[7]

Although earlier it was suggested that the fall of 2009 may have been the "season of the cougar," perhaps it is more accurate to say that 2009 in general was the *year* of the cougar. Alongside the derogatory versions of the cougar previously noted, television offered up a supply of more comical moments of cougardom in both the daytime and nighttime line-ups. For example, CBS's soap opera, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, offered viewers a classic cougar storyline between two characters, Jackie Marone, the powerful owner and CEO of her own design company, and Owen Knight, a man close in age to her adult son, Nick Marone. This relationship resulted in their marriage on July 3rd, 2009. The program capitalized on this cougar motif, as can be seen in figures 1 and 2.

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[7] Both of these examples, "Stacy's Mom" and "Don't Talk to Strangers," are by male bands, yet neither actually includes the term M.I.L.F. in their lyrics (although the latter includes the term cougar, which is sometimes used interchangeably). A contemporary song that does include this acronym is actually written by a woman – Tori Amos' "Big Wheel." This song, released in 2007, was banned from various radio stations because of its inclusion of the term. Also unlike the two previous examples, this song inaugurates the possibility of a more positive view of the word. Although, like many of Amos' songs, the lyrics are ambiguous to a degree, lyrics such as: "you think I am your possession… but baby I don't need your cash, Momma got it all in hand now" imply a sense of independence and self-confidence. The speaker's words indicate independence (financial and otherwise) and a sense of self-control or empowerment. The repeated phrase: "I-I-I am a MILF, Don't you forget," also indicates ownership of this term because she is calling herself a M.I.L.F.; also, the repetition of the word "I" indicates agency. Hence, the inclusion of this line serves to signify a re-appropriation of the term.



Fig. 1. Bold and the Beautiful, 2009; rpt. by CBS.com, 2009.



Fig. 2. Bold and the Beautiful, 2009; rpt. by CBS.com, 2009.

Primetime offered up its own moments of cougar-comedy, as ABC premiered its new sitcom, *Cougar Town*, staring Courtney Cox in September of 2009. The premise of the show is best captured by the voiceover the main character provides for its trailer:

> There comes a time in every woman's life when she has to take a long, hard look in the mirror and ask herself: what the hell is that?[8] ...For me that time has come... I'm recently divorced...with a pretty successful career and a well-adjusted teenage son... But my love life... Let's face it, it's nonexistent. Lately I've been feeling like I'm going to shrivel up and die if I don't just get out there and start doing things. And dating, are you kidding me, I'd date guys my own age but they're all out dating younger girls. I don't stand a chance.... With a little push from my friends... a little temptation... and a whole lot of courage... I'm finally taking the plunge... (Preview of ABC's *Cougar Town*)

The trailer ends with a male voiceover intoning: "Just be careful. It's a jungle out there" (Preview of ABC's *Cougar Town*). The words "Be Careful" fill the screen as an animal, presumably a cougar, roars.

The program did not ease into the subject matter promised by its title. By the end of the pilot episode, the main character, Jules, is, indeed, back "out there," and she has taken this first "plunge" with a twenty-something man. Toward the end of the episode, Jules and her young lover are seen sitting by the pool, her first sexual encounter as a cougar complete. The element of comedy comes into play as the viewer spies him munching on a snack of peanut butter and crackers, something Jules casually mentions she makes for her teenage son's friends. He sits happily eating as she carries on this jubilant dialogue: "I feel like I can see colors again.... We had sex three times without you needing a nap or pills or anything. How fun is that?" (Cougar Town). The scene ends with the viewers aware that she is performing felatio on him, as her son and ex husband walk in.

The year 2009 also got its fair share of laughs off the concept of the M.I.L.F. when *Saturday Night Live* premiered a Digital Short Video with Andy Samberg and Justin Timberlake titled "Mother Lover."[9] This

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[8] This question follows her self-critique of her naked body in the bathroom mirror, specifically her elbow wrinkles.

[9] To be clear, the attention to the Cougar/Puma/M.I.L.F. did not die out with the end of 2009. In 2010 another media outlet began capitalizing on these figures – the advertising industry. Hornito's Tequila debuted a commercial in which two twenty-something males stood talking in a kitchen. As one dials his telephone, remarking that he is going to call "this hot cougar from last night," the other tries to deter him, "whoa, my family's in town" (Hornito's Tequila 2010). The host's

Mother's Day tribute was a sequel to their popular video from a year prior, "Dick in a Box," and starred Susan Sarandon and Patricia Clarkson as their mothers. Samberg and Timberlake enter the scene dressed in 90s clothes and launch into a song about their creative solution for having forgotten to buy gifts for their mothers on mother's day:

> Both: What the hell are we gonna do?
> Justin Timberlake: My mom's been so alone
> Ever since my daddy left.
> Andy Samberg: Cold
> JT: No one to hold her tight
> Life has put her to the test.
> AS: I know just what you mean,
> My mom's been so sad and gray
> JT: Word
> AS: My dad can't satisfy her in the bedroom ever since he passed away.
> Both: Hold up.
> AS: You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'? …
> JT: It's time for a switcharoo
> Both: 'Cause I'm a Mother Lover
> You're a Mother Lover
> We should fuck each other's mothers…… (Mother Lover)

The video, obviously meant for comic intent as an *SNL* creation, draws upon the concepts of both the M.I.L.F. and the cougar without ever utilizing either term. It does not, however, shy away from vulgar content. Take for example these lines toward the end of the skit:

> AS: It would be my honor to be your new step-father
> JT: It would be my honor to be your new step-father
> AS: While you're in my mother
> Make me another brother
> JT: Damn
> And while I'm in your mother
> I'll never use a rubber. (Mother Lover)

This video suggests that these terms are not meant to be taken seriously. However, should this necessarily be the case? Would an improvisational scene with the roles reversed (two young women, perhaps, discussing plans to bed each other's fathers), receive the same reaction? And, perhaps

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objections must quickly end when all of a sudden a cell phone begins ringing on his kitchen table. The two men exchange incredulous looks as the host calls out, "mom, phone" (Hornito's Tequila 2010).

most importantly, despite the humorous *intent* behind a skit such as "Mother Lover," or the terms more generally, are these popular culture depictions really met with laughter when consumed by the public viewing audience, or are reactions a bit more complicated than this simple comedy formula might imply?

With all of these depictions of cougars, pumas, and M.I.L.F.s so prevalent in popular culture, we were curious to see if these "commonly" heard terms (and "commonly" seen images) would create "common" reactions to them, or if there would be other variables that would shape how one reacted to them.

## Survey Says: Studying the Individualized Reactions People Have to these Terms

We crafted a survey in order to determine whether specific subgroups reacted to these terms differently. Throughout a one year period, 235 surveys were disseminated. Data was collected through email solicitation, on college campuses, and on site at various women-centered events (Working Woman's Expos and a Bridal Expo in two different metropolitan areas).

The close-ended questions on this data collection tool focused primarily on reactions to these three terms (whether the participants felt that the terms were derogatory/belittling to women or flattering to them). Other questions pertained to whether women were viewed (or viewed themselves) as less sexually desirable after reaching a certain age or becoming a mother. And still others asked questions aligned with this study's focus on media representations of female sexuality. For example, three questions asked participants whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, strongly disagreed, or were neutral to the following statements: "The majority of popular culture (media, film, music) depicts mothers as pure/virginal"; "As of late, a subset of popular culture (i.e. situational comedies and movies) has brought attention to the "hot mom" taboo"; and "As of late, a subset of popular culture (film, TV, etc.) has brought attention to the sexuality of 30+ women."

The last subset of questions received an overwhelming consensus in terms of responses. Concerning the questions about the attention popular culture has given to the sexuality of mothers and middle-aged women, the majority of the respondents agreed that this trend has been on the rise. 75.8% of those polled felt that popular culture has brought attention to the "hot mom" taboo, while only 7.3% disagreed and 15.7% remained neutral. 80.4% of the participants believed that popular culture had brought

attention to the sexuality of women over the age of thirty, while only 4.3% disagreed and 11.1% remained neutral. However, it was the responses to the third question in this set that were the most surprising. When asked if popular culture depicts mothers as pure/virginal, a trend that had been noted in previous decades, 67.9% disagreed, while only 20.2% agreed and 21.9% remained neutral. Although these numbers may be expected to some degree, as it would be hard for popular culture to simultaneously depict middle aged women/mothers as both pure and promiscuous, this change from years past is worthy of note as it does imply that the rise in media images of the cougar, puma, and M.I.L.F. has helped to reverse the longstanding tradition of casting mothers as innocent or asexual creatures.

Two other questions that prompted a massive agreement in responses dealt with whether age or motherhood decreased a woman's sexual desirability. 72.9% of those surveyed disagreed that women become less desirable with age, while only 15.9% agreed and 15.8% were neutral. Similarly, 75.2% of the respondents disagreed that motherhood decreases a woman's sexual desirability, while 11.5% agreed and 13.3% were neutral. The consensus reached on these various questions was a pleasant surprise, as it can certainly be seen as a positive that women's sexuality is no longer devalued based on age or parental status. One possible interpretation of these results is that fictional portrayals of women in popular culture and opinions concerning real life women have a reciprocal relationship with one another. As these images in the media increase, popular opinion concerning the sexuality of older women/mothers is revised and conversely, as the public reformulates their opinions on the sexual desirability/activity of women, more diverse depictions of them surface in popular culture. However, not all of the questions on our survey produced results that were as clear cut.

Although we solicited quite a bit of background information, we actually only hypothesized that three variables would influence how people felt about these three terms in general: gender, age, and parental status. The next three sections highlight our findings in these areas.

## Through a Gendered Gaze: Male & Female Opinions on Sexualized Terminology

Although it was important to determine whether gender influences the reaction that individuals have toward these three terms, we were slightly more interested in women's reactions as they are the focus of these categories. Due to this fact, and also the fact that our data collection at various events was intended for a female rather than male audience, the

majority of our data is from female respondents. 196 women versus 38 men completed the survey. The reactions based on gender were not as striking as we would have expected, and perhaps a larger data pool would have yielded more obvious results. However, differences did appear, despite this small sampling of males. Concerning the term M.I.L.F., the majority of the women polled (52.9%) felt that the term was derogatory or belittling to women, while the men were more split on the question (39.5% felt that the term was derogatory while 47.4% did not).[10]

When asked the opposite question, if the term M.I.L.F was flattering to women, 55.6% of the women felt that it was not and 43.2% felt that it was.

When the focus of the questions shifted to age, the reactions were slightly different. One question asked participants whether the terms puma/cougar were derogatory/belittling to women. Women overall were quite divided on this issue (36.9% agreed, 36.1% disagreed, and 26.8% were neutral). Men, however, were less varied in their responses (only 21% agreed, while 52.7% disagreed and 26.3% were neutral). When the question was reversed and participants had to answer whether they felt the terms were flattering, the majority of the women disagreed (46.1%), but this time the men were split in their reactions (31.5% agreed, 39.4% disagreed, and 28.9% were neutral).

[10] The divergent opinions on these terms can best be seen on the open-ended questions on our survey where people could explain their feelings about the terms. One respondent (male, age 36-46) defined the term in a rather matter-of-fact way: a "Sophomoric term used to describe a fairly common fantasy." Others, however, reacted to the phrase with amusement: "I think it is hysterical. Although I grew up during a time when the term was first used in successful teen film" (female, age 26-35). And still others reacted to it with anger, "I don't like it because it makes a value judgment on a woman based upon the hormone-driven opinion of boys, who may be the same age as her own children, about whether or not they get a boner when they think of fucking her. It's disrespectful and the little Oedipal shits should be grounded if they can't keep their opinions to themselves" (female, age 46-55).

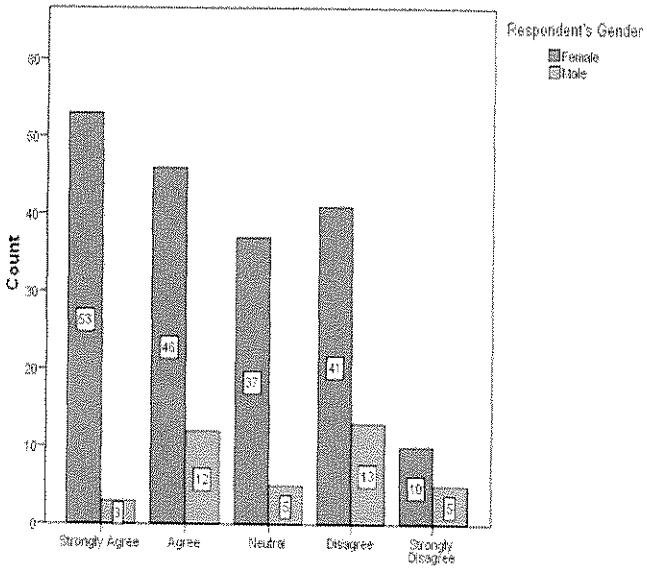



Fig. 3. Opinion on Whether the Term M.I.L.F. is Derogatory/Belittling to Women

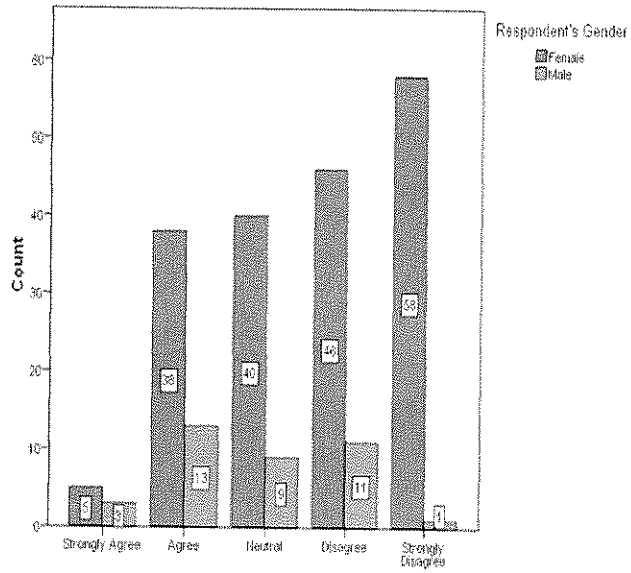



Fig. 4. Opinon on Whether the Term M.I.L.F. is Flattering to Women

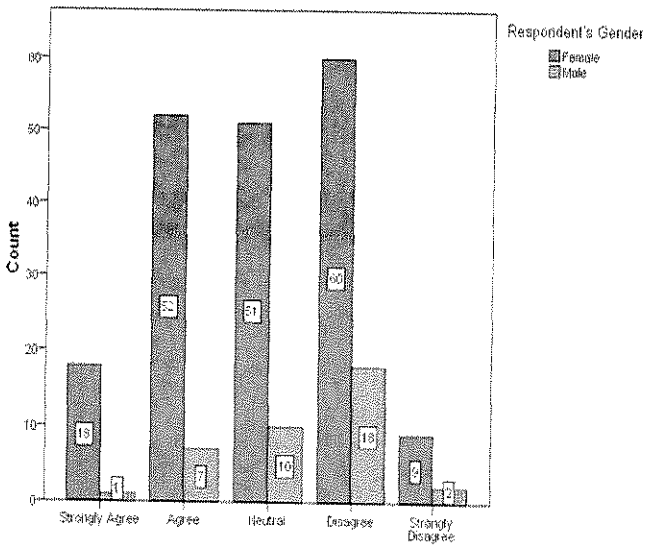



**Fig. 5. Opinion on Whether the Terms Puma/Cougar are Derogatory/Belittling to Women**

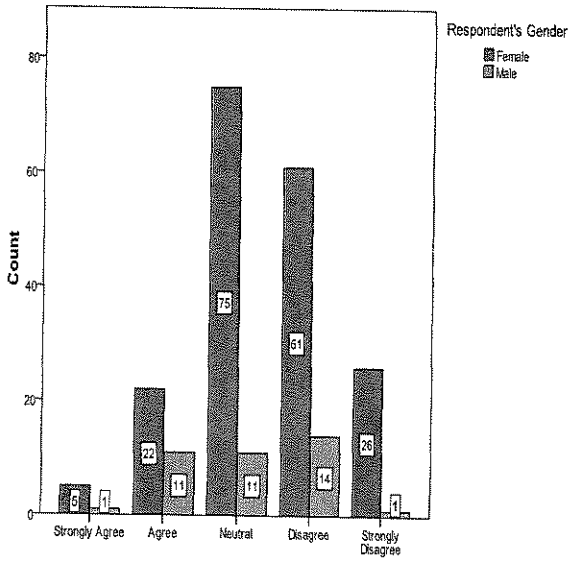



**Fig. 6. Opinion on Whether the Terms Puma/Cougar are Flattering to Women**

## Reactions to the Terms M.I.L.F., Cougar, & Puma by Age Group

While the data results for our survey in terms of gender may have been skewed toward females, in terms of age, the data collection was pretty evenly dispersed. 54.9% of the participants were 35 years or younger and 45.1% were 36 years of age or older. This division actually works well for this particular study given that those in the 35 and under age bracket would have been in their teens and early twenties when terms like M.I.L.F became mainstream (and this would have been a likely age demographic to have seen *American Pie* when it was first released in 1999), whereas those in the 36 and above category would have been less influenced by the early wave of popular culture products centered around these terms.

We had hypothesized that those under 35 (particularly those in the 0-25 age range) would be more accepting of all three terms, while those 36 and upward would find the terms to be more negative. Our predictions were not exactly confirmed. Those 35 and under reported mixed reactions to the terms and were split on almost all of the questions concerning whether the three terms were derogatory/belittling or flattering toward women.[11] What was interesting was that despite the ambivalence in the younger generations concerning this term, an ambivalence which could be argued shows just how individualized one's reactions to these terms are, is that with each age bracket the percentage of respondents who thought the terms were negative increased. For example, 27.9% of 18-25; 28.8% of 26-35; 35.4% of 36-45; 38.8% of 46-55; and 45.7% of 56-up were offended by the terms cougar and puma, and 42.7% of 18-25; 39.7% of 26-35; 55.1% of 36-45; 60.0% of 46-55; and 69.2% of 56-up were offended by the term M.I.L.F. Similar trends were spotted when the questions were reversed. Those under the age of 35 were more split on whether all three terms might be considered flattering to women, but as age increased respondents were less likely to view the terms in a positive light. For example, 62% of participants ages 36-45, 70.6% of those 46-55, and 74.3% of those over 56 did not feel that these terms could be seen as flattering.

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[11] Like the open-ended response questions concerning the word M.I.L.F., those that solicited free responses to the terms cougar and puma were quite interesting. They ranged from supportive responses: "I respond positively and think it's funny; but that may be because it's helping me cope with my own aging issues. I appreciate it acknowledges women over the age of 20 can still be seen as appealing" and "To me pumas and cougars are creatures of strength, so I feel that in some ways, the terms are complimentary, as in a strong powerful woman, who could tear you apart" to more negative responses, such as: "Offensive, seems belittling...makes a woman animalistic" and "Reminds me of women going through a midlife crisis."

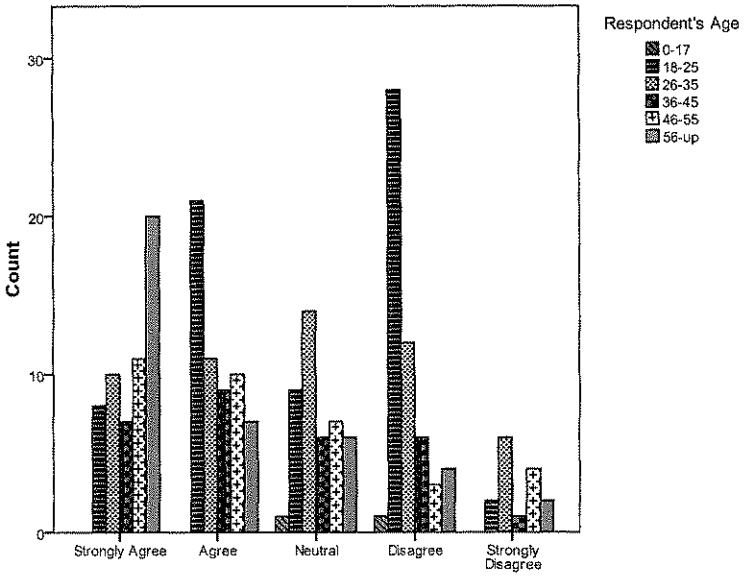



**Fig. 7. Opinion on Whether the Term M.I.L.F. is Derogatory/Belittling to Women**

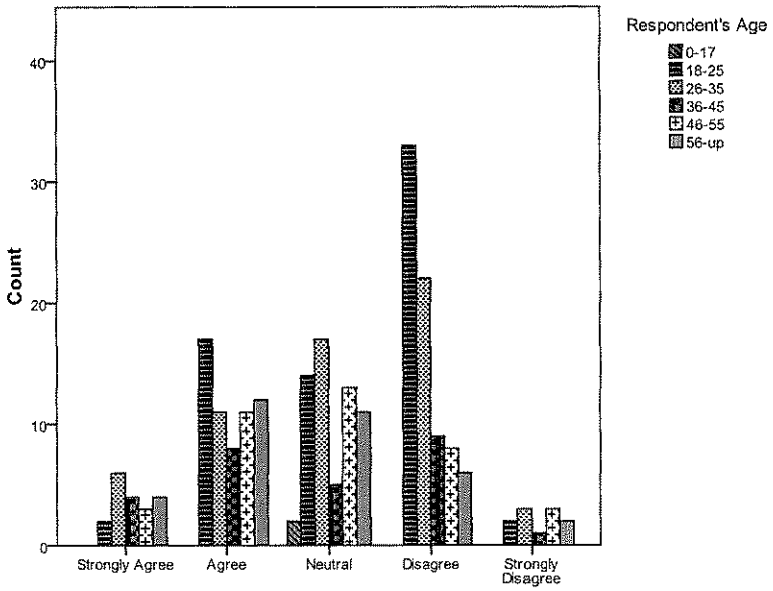



**Fig. 8. Opinion on Whether the Terms Puma/Cougar are Derogatory/Belittling to Women**

## The Impact of Parental Status on Reactions toward Popular Culture Depictions

Just as the age groups reflected on this survey were well distributed, so too were the number of parents and non-parents. 51.8% reported their status as non-parent, while 48.2% reported that they were, indeed, parents. While we had anticipated a distinct difference in the answers between the two subgroups, especially relating to the questions regarding the term M.I.L.F., this was not the case. For example, neither group found the term flattering. While there was a difference, it was not quite as significant as we would have expected: 44.1% of non-parents found the term to be negative and 61.0% of parents did so as well.

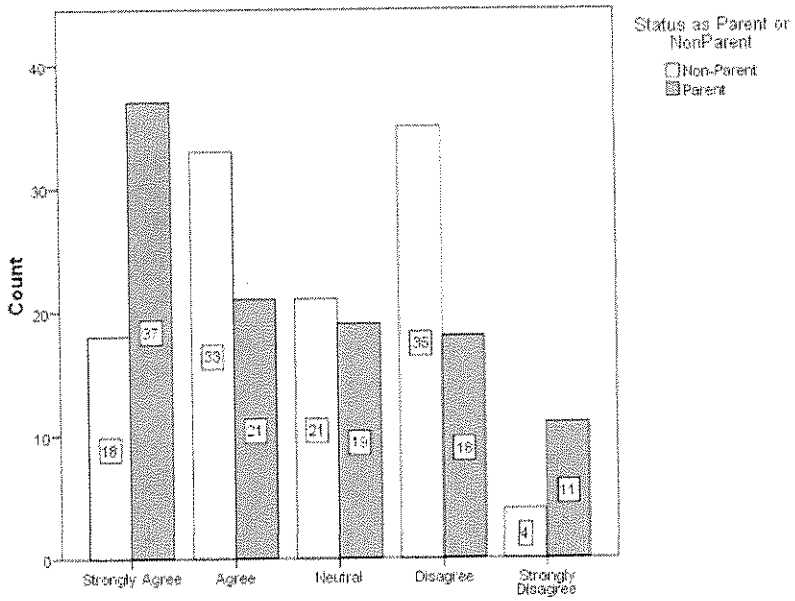



**Fig. 9. Opinion on Whether the Term M.I.L.F. is Derogatory/Belittling to Women**

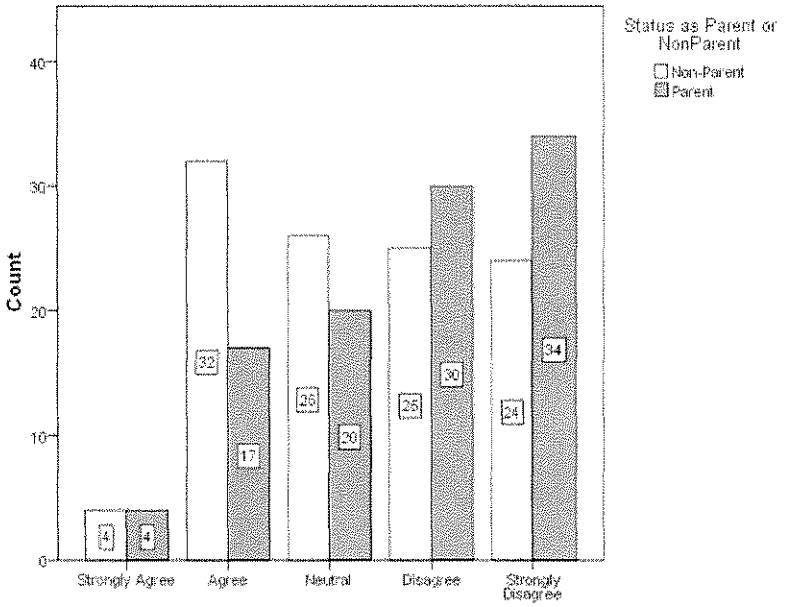



**Fig. 10. Opinon on Whether the Term M.I.L.F. is Flattering to Women**

## Empathetic Perceptions Questions: Results by Gender, Age, & Parental Status

Some of the most interesting findings based on the survey data were not restricted to any one demographic grouping alone. Two questions on the survey asked participants to imagine, or reflect on, women's self-conceptualization. One question asked for opinions on whether becoming a mother makes women regard themselves as less sexually desirable to others, and another asked for thoughts on whether aging makes women regard themselves as less sexually desirable to others. As discussed earlier, all groups reported that neither was the case in general – that age and/or motherhood did not negatively affect a woman's desirability. However, when these questions were modified to become questions focused on women's self-reflection in this regard, the answers varied greatly. In all cases, the respondents not being implicated in the questions (men, younger adults, and non-parents), all believed that women's self-image *would* be influenced by these life changes (growing older or becoming

a mother). However, women themselves (and parents and older participants in general) did not report feeling this way.

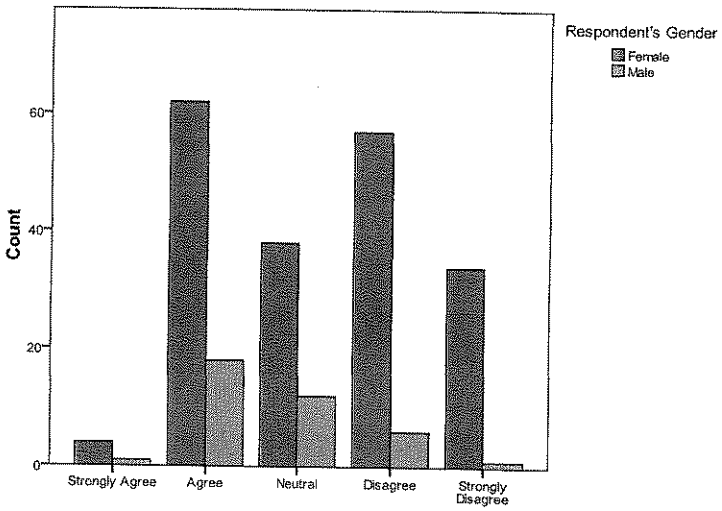



**Fig. 11. Opinon on Whether Becoming a Mother Makes Women Regard Themselves as Less Desirable to Others**

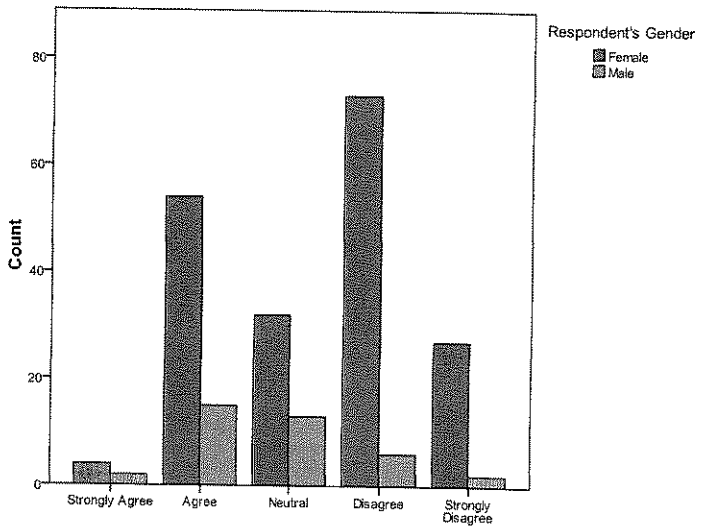



**Fig. 14. Opinion on Whether Aging Makes Women View Themselves as Less Desirable to Others**

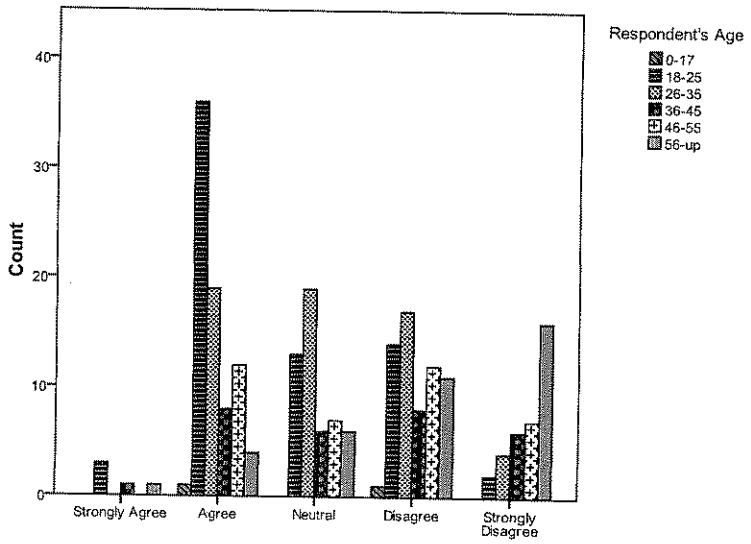



**Fig. 12. Opinon on Whether Becoming a Mother Makes Women Regard Themselves as Less Desirable to Others**

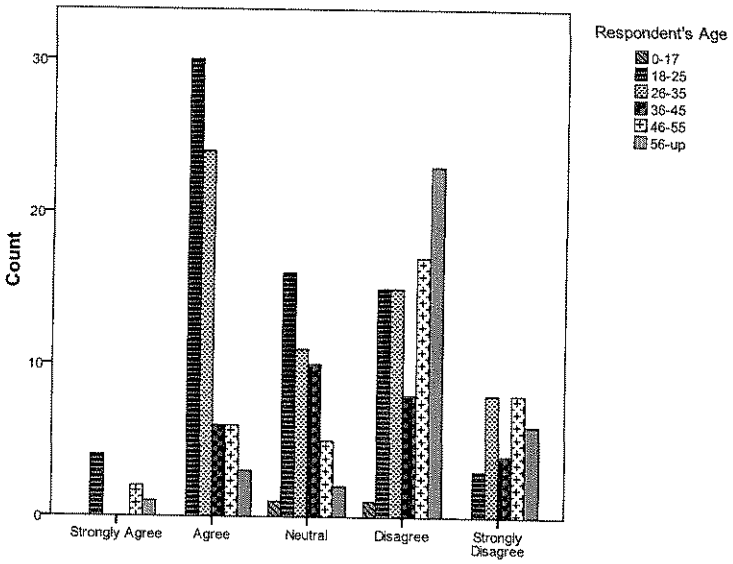



**Fig. 15. Opinion on Whether Aging Makes Women View Themselves as Less Desirable to Others**

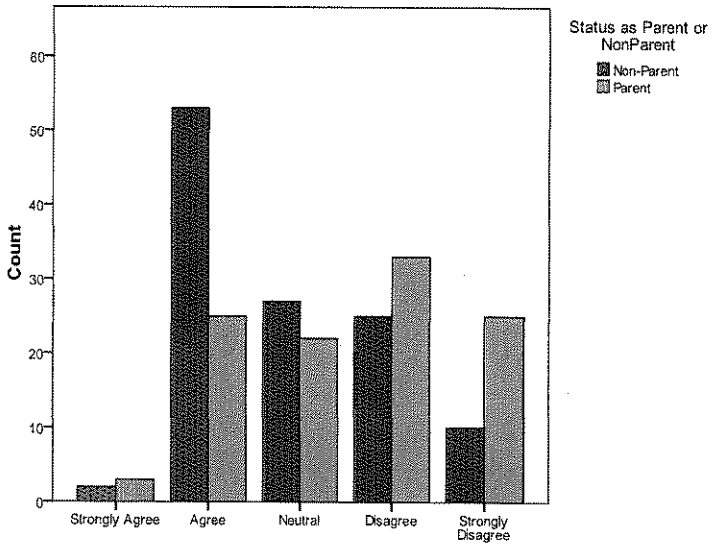



**Fig. 13. Opinon on Whether Becoming a Mother Makes Women Regard Themselves as Less Desirable to Others**

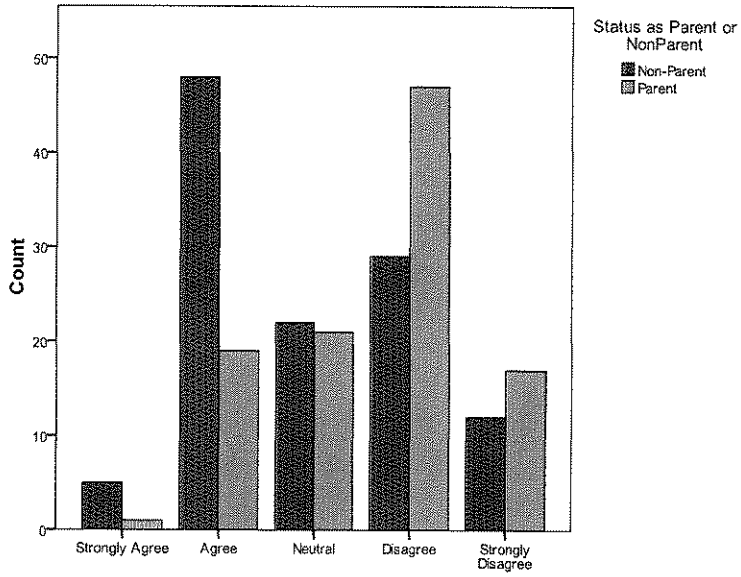



**Fig. 16. Opinion on Whether Aging Makes Women View Themselves as Less Desirable to Others**

These findings are interesting for two different reasons. One reason is that they represent a positive finding – that *women's self-image and sexual confidence are not negatively affected by age or parental status.* This would seem to contradict earlier beliefs about women's self conceptualization. This is also significant because the findings indicate an inability for men, younger adults, and non-parents to accurately assess how older women and/or mothers view their own sexuality. Despite the fact that popular culture now presents the public with various depictions of sexually active and empowered mothers and more mature women, some participants still appear to assume women do not necessarily relate to these fictional portrayals. It seems that in terms of empathetic identification, participants still operate under assumptions existing before the popular culture boom of sexualized imagery of women.

## The Search for Male Terms Relating to Age & Sexual Activity

One of the final questions on our survey asked participants to reflect on terms that might exist for men that would mirror terms like cougar, puma, and M.I.L.F. It read: "All three of these terms refer *specifically* to women's sexual desirability as it relates to age. Do you know of any terms that refer *specifically* to the sexual desirability of men as it relates to age? If so, what are these terms, and what do they mean?" Out of our 235respondents, only 96 were able to list any terms. This speaks to the gendered nature of this phenomenon in popular culture today. Some of the terms that were listed included: Manther – the male version of a cougar (man + panther); F.I.L.F. (father I'd like to f---), D.I.L.F. (dad I'd like to f---), Clooney (a George Clooney type), and the more well known terms: sugar daddy and silver fox. But, as one of our respondents pointed out, these terms "kind of miss the insinuations of cougar and puma." This lack of responses was not surprising given the scarcity of these male-directed terms in popular culture (and they certainly have not warranted sitcoms, reality shows, and cruises devoted to them).[12] Also not surprising were people's reactions to these terms. When asked if these male-directed

[12] However, to be fair, exactly one year after *Cosmopolitan* released its article on the puma, in May 2010 the term "D.I.L.F." did make an appearance in the magazine in one of its "Most Sexy Lists." (Johnny Depp was listed as the "most sexy D.I.L.F." according to this source). Of course, the term was not defined and it was simply mentioned in passing, which is very different from the feature length article that ran the year prior on the "new kind of woman" on the prowl for men.

terms were derogatory/belittling to men or flattering, most agreed (42.1%) that they were more often flattering rather than belittling. This brings up, again, the issue of the double standard. These responses indicate that terms signaling sexual aptitude are flattering when designating men, but this is not necessarily the case when they are directed at women.

## Conclusion

The 21st century has cemented the words cougar, puma, and M.I.L.F. into the popular culture lexicon, for better or worse, making the terminology concerning sexualized women a regular occurrence in popular culture. We have suggested that these terms might precipitate another backlash, reminiscent of that against the feminist movement two decades prior. These terms, while often utilized for a variety of purposes, may act as ideal tools for conservative platforms that wish to strategically warn the public against the non-maternal female figure who chooses anything over, or alongside of, family. Beyond these potential political implications, the terms are also problematic in other ways. The terms cougar, puma, and M.I.L.F. can be used as a method to further sexually objectify women, reinforce the sexual double standard, and conform to normative cultural beliefs – no matter if it is a male or a female who uses them. Also, there is always a danger with terms that enable categorization, especially a type of categorization that is not done as often with men, as our survey results show.

However, condemning these terms without considering their potential utility would not be productive. It would also ignore the interesting ambiguity that our study proved is present among similar demographics (gender, age, parental status) concerning reactions to these terms. The wide range of responses voiced concerning these terms – from women who would write "I love them!" or "I am a M.I.L.F.!" to "I find them offensive" or simply "disgusting" – proves that reactions to these terms are quite individualized.

While there are, quite obviously, many problems with the terms themselves – the lack of a subject position in the word M.I.L.F., the fact that the terms were first utilized by males alone, and the lingering alignment of these words with comedy (implying that it is all right to laugh at the objectification of women) – that they are now being appropriated by women is worthy of note. The reclamation of terms that deal with race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation is not a new phenomenon (the reappropriation of "queer" being a key example). These gendered terms, new as they are to popular culture, may certainly fit into

the category of terms that are refunctioned to serve a constructive purpose. For the women who embrace these words, stealing them from the realm of the pejorative and transferring them into the realm of productivity, they are gateways to subversive acts, a means to reject cultural mandates concerning their sexuality, and a method to celebrate their self-efficacy. The fact that these terms can be wrestled from their original contexts, to be "owned" and "performed" by the very women they were meant to objectify and/or control, is – although not problem free – critical. The complicated uses of these terms in popular culture, and the conflicted relationships people have with them, make this trinity of slang a worthy topic for future study in the 21st century.

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