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Disease or Release? A Content Analysis on How is Menopause Framed in Romanian Online Media

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Abstract. Menopause is a natural biological event in every middle-aged woman life, but despite this universal character, the main ways to perceive this phenomenon are, often, „constructed” by social instances such as medicine or popular culture. The paper presents the main results of a traditional quantitative content analysis conducted on the six most popular Romanian online magazines for women (*Avantaje.ro, Femeia.ro, Unica.ro, Elle.ro, Cosmopolitan.ro, Libertatea pentru femei.ro*), and on three most visited websites with medical content (*reginamaria.ro, medlife.ro, and csid.ro*), in order to establish which are the main approaches regarding menopause. The content analysis was focused on the gender of the author and/or source of information, on types of words that are used in association with menopause, and photographs in articles. The results depict a predominant negative image of menopause, as a phase in women’s life marked by health issues. Also, an important difference from other analyzes of how menopause is presented in the media is that the implications of menopause on the sex lives of menopausal women are no longer taboo. Additionally, the infertility, as expression of loosing reproductive abilities, especially when we talk about premature menopause, seems to be another big associated issue, according to the research data. Using these results as starting point of discussion, the main topics that framed menopause in ROU online media are placed in the wider context: its role as social instance that could influence women’s perceptions about their menopausal experiences, considered socially relevant only if they are “useful bodies”, with intact reproductive capacities.

Keywords. Menopause, social construction, content analysis

1. Introduction

Menopause is, in essence, a biological condition for every middle-aged woman or, in some particular cases, for women who suffered a surgical intervention or are confronted with other medical issues that affect their ovarian functions. But, despite this biological character, that could be considered universally available, there are researches and studies which bring into attention counterarguments to the biological perspective of the universality of the phenomenon. A consistent contribution in this regard is represented by a series of studies, qualitative and quantitative, dedicated to this issue, that take into account cultural, inter-generational or other aspects related to the social context in which menopause is experienced. In an article that analyzes the differences, in terms of menopause experiences, between some distinct categories of women (women in urban areas and women in rural areas, women who speak or do not speak English, etc.), based on research in which 140 women participated, realized by the focus-group technique, Daly [1] concludes that the interpretation of menopausal

symptoms is socially mediated, both gender and age contributing to negative cultural stereotypes regarding the social importance of middle-aged women. In two other articles, referring to the experiences of menopause lived by women in certain countries, Lock [2] and Chirawatkul & Manderson [3] devoted their studies of menopause mythologies in Japan and North America, respectively to menopause perceptions in Thailand. Their conclusions are relatively similar, emphasizing the importance of the cultural context in self-perceptions regarding menopause. The importance of intergenerational differences in understanding the subjective experiences of American women related to menopause is also pointed out in a qualitative study conducted with 24 middle-aged women interviewed in their homes [4]. All of these studies contradict the universality of the experience of menopause and reinforce the idea that, in fact, the social construction of menopause can be seen, for example, as part of a public discourse that seeks to control the effects of aging of female bodies, which lose their social importance with the loss of their reproductive capacities [5].

Another research, conducted by Flint & Samil [6] among the Rajput population of northern India is one of the first to show that there are cultures in which the absence of menstruation is one that gives women freedom they previously did not have: they should not also submit to the *purdah*¹ and they can move freely through the village. The authors suggest that the menopausal descriptions of these women, asymptomatic and made in positive terms, can be attributed to this change in their social life. Flint then contrasts this positive local mode to perceive menopause with the negative stereotype associated with it in North America.

The importance of the cultural context is also highlighted in the ethnographic studies conducted by Beyene [7], [8] on the reproductive lives of women belonging to Mayan rural communities in Yucatan (Mexico) and some from the island of Evia (Greece). According to her research data, Mayan women do not have the classic symptoms of menopause (as compared to Greek women) - night sweats or hot flushes. Moreover, the author considers that, in addition to the cultural context, there are other variables, such as diet and reproductive histories of women², which influence both the time of onset and the perceptions regarding menopause. Thus, the researches allow her to label menopause as a bio-cultural phenomenon and conclude that "in non-Western, nonindustrialized societies, as the reproductive role ceases, women may take on new social roles; in a culture where fertility is highly valued, menopause may have social and psychological ramifications"[7] (p. 1).

Not only the anthropological studies dedicated to the experiences of menopause in different cultures have revealed differences that question the universality of this phenomenon, but also some quantitative approaches (epidemiological studies carried out in different countries, as well as comparative studies based on the application of the same symptom evaluation tool on representative samples of women from different countries/cultural areas).

The results of quantitative studies, carried out on certain categories of women or on several (comparative) categories, show that the symptoms reported by different populations of middle-aged women vary, to a lesser or greater extent, depending on the country/cultural area

¹ *Purdah* represents a custom "widespread in the cultures of the East, which requires women to hide their forms or just the head or neck of any other man except members of her family; the expression comes from the Persian language, where *purdah* means nothing but a curtain; and the role of this custom is really to raise a curtain between the community and the family, between the public and the private space of woman" ("<http://www.ici-colo.ro/2012/10/Dictionar-de-moda-feminina-orientala-dincolo-de-valuri.html>).

² As the author points out, in the case of Maya women, these reproductive histories are marked by numerous pregnancies, which consequently cause long periods of amenorrhea (prolonged by periods of lactation and malnutrition).

of origin. Thus, based on a comparative study of women in Japan and Australia, conducted between 2001 and 2002, Anderson et al. [9] conclude that there are significant differences, depending on the country of residence, regarding the vasomotor symptomatology at menopause, as well as regarding some psychological or psychosomatic aspects: states of tension or nervousness, sleep difficulties, feelings of unhappiness or depression, etc.

All these studies proved, thus, the importance of the social/cultural context in the construction of menopause, as subjective experience for the middle-aged women from different societies. But, which are the main social or cultural instances that mediate this construction? Many studies and analyses referring to the Western societies underline the importance of the medicine in this process (e.g., [10], [1], and [11]). According to most of these studies, menopause was and still is “shaped” by the medical science as a disease or, at least, as a medical condition that requires treatment (hormonal substitutes or, more recent, alternative therapies, such as that with phytoestrogens extracted from soybeans or other natural elements).

Beside the medical approach, another social instance, but with less analyzed contribution to the social construction of menopause, is popular culture. Hust & Andsager, in their article from 2003 [12] underlined the fact that “little research has been conducted on popular media’s representation of menopause. [...] Research on media coverage of middle-aged women is virtually nonexistent, undoubtedly because media coverage of middle-aged women is sparse” (p. 103). However, there are several articles that present content and/or discourse analysis on menopause, carried out on various types of publications including popular magazines or newspapers (e.g., [12], [13], and [14]). The findings from these studies underlined that the media tend to reinforce the image of menopause as disease or as a negative and full of issues phase in women’s lives, including as a deterioration of their beauty and femininity. Thus, as Winterich & Umberson [15] underlined “popular culture and medical practice construct menopause as a time of “loss”, because our culture equates beauty with the young female body” (p. 57).

All the studies mentioned above are conducted on middle-aged women from the Western societies or on women from different Asian and South-American countries, but there are no studies that addressed this issue regarding Romanian women. How they experience the menopause? Which are their main sources of information about this aspect? And finally how is menopause presented in the Romanian popular culture, such as magazines for women or websites with medical advises for women?

2. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Considering the aspects discussed above, related to the main ways that popular culture framed menopause in the Western cultures, the present research sought to answer the following questions:

RQ1: Which is the main way to depict menopause in the Romanian online media?

RQ2: Will be the medical perspective about menopause the predominant approach in the Romanian online media?

Starting from these research questions, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The main word categories/topics regarding menopause will be associated with illness and loss of youth and/or beauty.

H2: The negative terms associated with menopause will be significantly more than positive ones.

H3: The menopause will be approached in a gendered perspective: the authors of the articles will be predominantly women, and the specialists interviewed or who express their opinion will be mostly men.

H4: The photos that illustrate the articles will present women mainly in a negative way: sad, worried, with health issues, etc.

3. Method

A total of 49 online articles, published between 2012 and 2020, in the six of the most popular Romanian online magazines for women (*Avantaje.ro, Femeia.ro, Unica.ro, Elle.ro, Cosmopolitan.ro, Libertatea pentru femei.ro*), and three medical sites (*reginamaria.ro, medlife.ro, and csid.ro*) were analyzed. Initially, aprox. 150 articles were identified, using as key word *menopause*, but most of them were deleted from further analysis because they were unrelated to aspects of menopause (e.g., menopause was mentioned only once in the article, aside to the menses, as aspect that could cause physical discomfort for women).

The selected articles were analyzed using the classic content analysis model. The coding process was realized using a coding schedule and a coding manual [16]. The content categories included in the coding schedule were: title, year of online publication, gender of the author, gender and occupation of interviewee (where applicable), type of photo(s) that illustrated the article, number of words associated with the following themes:

- **disease** (terms and expressions such as: *disease, symptom, treatment, (hormone replacement) therapy medical advice, hormone deficiency, osteoporosis, hot flashes, night sweats, headaches, urinary incontinence, ovarian cancer, hysterectomy*, etc.)

- **psychological/emotional issues** (terms and expressions such as: *depression, anxiety, sadness, insomnia, emotional instability, irritability, mental fatigue, psychotherapy or psychotherapist*, etc.);

- **physical appearance** (terms and expressions such as: *altered or less firm skin, wrinkles, loss of hair, loss of femininity, skin loses its radiance, fattening/weight gain*, etc.)

- **difficulties in sexual life** (terms and expressions such as: *affected sex life, decreased sexual appetite, low libido, vaginal dryness, loss of interest in intimate relationships, pain in sexual intercourse*, etc.);

- **infertility** (terms and expressions such as: *infertility, disappearance of menstruation, irregular cycles, can't (anymore) have children, can't (anymore) get pregnant, impossible pregnancy, depletion of the ovarian reserve, dysfunctional ovaries, decreased reproductive function*, etc.), and

- **number of positive words associated with menopause** (terms and expressions such as: *reconciled with your age, natural contraceptive, get rid of unwanted pregnancy, inner peace, you have time for yourself, you don't have to by tampons anymore, get rid of menstrual pain*, etc.).

The coding schedule for each item/article was completed separately, by two independent coders, using the coding manual with instructions for each content category. All data were transferred in SPSS 20.0, and the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) were calculated for variables regarding the number of words associated with menopause, in order to assess the consistency of quantitative measurements made by the two independent coders. The ICCs have values between 0.81 and 0.98 (good and excellent values, according to the literature (for example, Koo & Lee [17])). The significance between means was tested with T test for Paired Samples.

4. Results

In table 1, and table 2, distributions of online media items analyzed, by name of the online magazines/medical websites and by year of publication are presented.

Table 1. Distribution of online media items by name of the online magazines/websites

Name of the online magazine	n (%)
<i>Avantaje.ro</i>	11 (22)
<i>Femeia.ro</i>	10 (21)
<i>Unica.ro</i>	10 (21)
<i>Libertatea pentru femei.ro</i>	7 (14)
<i>Elle.ro</i>	2 (4)
<i>Cosmopolitan.ro</i>	2 (4)
<i>reginamaria.ro</i>	4 (8)
<i>medlife.ro</i>	1 (2)
<i>csid.ro</i>	2 (4)

Table 2. Distribution of online media items by year of publication

Year of publication	n (%)
2020	2 (4)
2019	6 (12)
2018	9 (19)
2017	12 (25)
2016	4 (8)
2015	7 (14)
2013	1 (2)
2012	1 (2)
not available	7 (14)

Hypothesis 1. The first hypothesis predicted that the main word categories/topics regarding menopause will be associated with illness and loss of youth and/or beauty. According to the research data, this hypothesis could be only partially supported: the largest number of words associated with menopause is referring to health issues, but those associated with physical appearance, and, implicitly, with loss of youth and beauty are less than those regarding difficulties in the sexual life and almost equal with those referring to the infertility (table 3).

Table 3. Data regarding number of words associated with menopause, by content categories

Content category	Min	Max	Sum	Mean	St. dev	ICC	95% Confidence interval for ICC
Words associated with disease	0	96	1037	21.16	20.95	0.95	0.94 – 0.98
Words associated with psychological issues	0	23	261	5.33	5.25	0.98	0.97 – 0.99
Words associated with physical appearance	0	10	92	1.88	2.78	0.94	0.88 – 0.97
Words associated with sexual life issues	0	18	127	2.59	4.07	0.92	0.84 – 0.96
Words associated with infertility	0	12	82	1.67	2.73	0.84	0.65 – 0.92

Hypothesis 2. The second hypothesis could be supported, since the number of negative words is significantly greater than that of positive ones, as the value of *t* for the difference between the two means proved (table 4).

Table 4. Data for negative³ and positive words associated with menopause

Type of words	Min	Max	Sum	Mean	St. Dev	ICC	95% Confidence interval for ICC	t (df)
Negative words	1	118	1599	32.63	26.13	0.98	0.95 – 0.99	7.68** (48)
Positive words	0	22	151	3.08	4.68	0.81	0.36 – 0.92	

** significant for $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

Hypothesis 3: The third hypothesis could not be confirmed: most of the authors, as well as the specialists interviewed or expressing their opinion about menopause are women (table 5).

Table 5. Distribution of gender of the authors and the specialists

Gender of the authors	n (%)
F	29 (59)
Not specified	20 (41)
Gender of the specialists	
F	6 (12)
M	2 (4)
Not applicable	41 (84)

Hypothesis 4. According to the fourth hypothesis, the menopausal women will be visually portrayed in a generally negative way. Analyzing the photos associated with the online items, this hypothesis couldn't be confirmed: most of the photos accompanied the articles could be depicted as presenting women in positive terms (smiling, looking into the camera), even if those presenting women with negative expressions (with a sad face or having a headache) are almost in the same number (table 6).

Table 6. Distribution of the type of photos associated with online items

Type of photos	n (%)
Photos of women with a positive attitude	14 (28)
Photos of women with a negative expression	12 (24)
Photos of couples	6 (12)
Photos of medicines/food supplements	5 (10)
Without photos	5 (10)
Photos representing medical consult	3 (6)
Photos from events dedicated to menopause	2 (4)
Photos with dishes	1 (2)
Photos of men	1 (2)

³ The negative words associated with menopause was a composite variable created by summing the number of words associated with disease, psychological issues, physical appearance, difficulties in sexual life and infertility.

5. Conclusions and discussion

The main way to depict menopause in the Romanian online media is an inconsistent one. On the one hand, the number of negative aspects associated with menopause (physical symptoms, psychological/emotional issues, infertility, sexual issues) significantly outweighs the number of positive ones. On the other hand, the photos accompanied these articles present, in most cases, women with a positive attitude, in an evident contradiction with the content.

The loss of youth and beauty, as a form of deviation from the social norm, as Zita [18] calls it⁴, is present in the articles included in research, but is not as important, according to the number of words associated with it. Rather, the topic of issues associated with the sexual life of menopausal women is more prominent, proving the fact that this subject is no more a taboo one.

In Romanian online magazines, menopause is a topic generally covered by women, as authors of the articles, as well as specialists interviewed or expressing their opinion regarding this subject. This situation is consistent with other researches regarding media representation of menopause [12] and in total contradiction with the situation of scientific papers dedicated to this topic: there are authors [19] that underline the fact that the vast majority of the medical literature dedicated to menopause is produced by men, despite the fact that is an exclusively feminine experience.

The main research results depict, thus, a predominant negative image of menopause, as a phase in women's life marked mainly by health issues and difficulties in sexual life. Is an image of menopause that contradict other researches regarding the main ways in which menopausal women themselves perceived this phase of their life: in predominant positive terms, as an opportunity to experience freedom, including in their sex life, once the spectrum of an unwanted pregnancy is by itself removed [20]. Additionally, the infertility, as expression of loosing reproductive abilities, seems to be another aspect perceived as negative. This aspect represents, as other authors underlined, only an expression of the patriarchal vision about women bodies, as useful "tools" for the perpetuation of the human kind [21]. Once their reproductive capacities are ceased, they are nothing but "useless" bodies, if they do not try to postpone the inevitable.

6. Limitations

The limitations of this study should be shortly summarized. Firstly, the number of selected items was relatively small, not allowing the execution of more complex statistical analyzes, to compare the different categories of themes or topics addressed. Secondly, it is only a quantitative perspective, that needs to be completed with a qualitative one – a discourse analyze and/or a narrative approach, in order to obtain more detailed and in-depth information about this subject.

It can be assumed that once the study will be continued, and these limitations will be exceeded, the results will be more conclusive and richer in new aspects and details regarding the image built by the Romanian online media regarding menopause and Romanian middle-aged women.

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⁴ The author underlines that, in popular culture, this deviation translates into penalizing weight gain, loss of skin elasticity, etc.

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