



THE RED HAT SOCIETY

Fun and Friendship after 50

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ABSTRACT

The social impact of the Red Hat Society is twofold: first, the "dis-organization" is grounded solely in the belief that women over 50 have too long been ignored by society...hence the outrageous hats, boas and colors that accompany a Red Hat outing (Cooper, 2004).

The sheer number of "Red Hatters" worldwide has turned a whimsical social group into a thriving brand name complete with licensed products, conventions, and a line of romance novels!

The popularity of the Red Hat Society should not surprise us, knowing what we do about the demography of older women and how much they rely on their friends for social support.

Therefore, the Society is providing essential socialization for older women who thrive on the benefits that friendship provides, especially as they age (and are often widowed).

INTRODUCTION

•On average, women live longer than men (Quadagno, 2005)

•The majority of older women are single (Quadagno, 2005)

•Friendship is especially meaningful in old age and has been shown to reduce health problems (Cooper, 2004)

•One million women worldwide (the vast majority over 50 years old) have embraced the Red Hat Society's goals of fun and friendship since its founding in 1997 (www.redhatsociety.com).

"The Red Hat Society philosophy of life suggests that one is never too old to make new friends, try new things or have adventures. One of our favorite catchphrases is, "we're not done yet!"

Sue Ellen Cooper, Founder of the Red Hat Society (Sutherland, 2005, forward).

LITERATURE REVIEW

"When I am an old woman, I shall wear purple/with a red hat that doesn't go, and doesn't suit me."
Warning by Jenny Joseph, 1961

Birth of a Nation

The Red Hat Society started innocently enough, when Exalted Queen Mother Sue Ellen Cooper gave one of her friends a copy of Jenny Joseph's poem *Warning* and a fabulous red hat (Priesnitz,2002).

What's the Deal with those Red Hats?!?!?

While women of all ages are welcomed, the impetus behind the founding (and implicit in Jenny Joseph's poem) is that women of a certain age--in this case, the magical number 50--are ignored by society (Cooper, 2004).

Hattitude Defined

Ah, hattitude! Of course there is more to outrageous hats, bright colors and feather boas than just making a statement...it's fun to play dress up! And fun, whimsy, silliness and creativity are the name of the game for Red Hatters (Cooper, 2004).

Strength in Number\$

The Red Hat Society and all the pins, scarves, stuffed animals and knick knacks that come with it wields some serious buying power. Savvy retailers across the globe have realized it as big business, and the Red Hat Society has secured licensing with 28 manufacturers and struck a partnership with QVC (Orr, 2005).



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

•As Exalted Queen Mother Sue Ellen says, "We're figuring out how to age without getting old." (Cooper, 2004, p. 70).

•Physicians have even prescribed membership to aging women who are depressed and disconnected (Cooper, 2004).

•Its national convention grew from 400 Red Hatters in 2002 to 5,000 in 2005 (www.redhatsociety.com).

•There are currently 20 chapters in the Central Oregon area alone (www.redhatsociety.com).

"Our circle of friends and interests does not need to shrink as we get older; it can expand."

Sue Ellen Cooper, Founder of the Red Hat Society (Cooper, 2004, p. 10)

CONCLUSION

The Red Hat Society is important because its character has been created and celebrated solely by the members. These women are celebrating silliness and sisterhood while refusing to let society ignore them.

As journalist Wendy Priesnitz states, "The Red Hat Society has spontaneously organized themselves into something of a revolution about the way society views older women." (Priesnitz, 2002, p.16)

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