

The relationship between age-gap relationships/dating, sexual function, relationship satisfaction, sexual self-efficacy and well-being

Abstract

This study aimed to look at the relationship between age-gap relationships among a diverse group of people with sexual function, relationship satisfaction, sexual self-efficacy and well-being. An age-gap relationship in this study referred to an age difference of around 7-10 years. One hundred and twenty-six participants aged 18 to 50 years and above involved in an age-gap relationship/dating took part in an online cross-sectional survey of questionnaires measuring demographic information, sexual functioning, relationship satisfaction, sexual self-efficacy and well-being. For men, relationship satisfaction was a predictor of age-gap relationships and for women, relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction and sexual pain were predictors of age-gap relationships across genders and sexuality. Compared to younger men dating older women, older men dating younger women were more preoccupied with their sexual functioning and had higher levels of ejaculatory difficulties. Compared to older women dating younger men, younger women dating older men reported lower levels of sexual satisfaction, sexual arousal, lubrication and orgasms. The perception of economic gain predominated among younger women dating older men and younger men dating older men. Outcomes suggest that higher sexual and relationship satisfaction was reported by older adults who date younger individuals. However, there needs to be a stronger LGBTQIA+ voice being represented in age-gap relationship research aimed at informing psychosexual services in supporting diverse people.

Key-words: age-gap relationships, sexual function, relationship satisfaction, sexual self-efficacy, well-being

Lay Abstract

Little is known about age-gap relationship satisfaction, including sexual satisfaction across genders and sexuality. We wanted to know more about these relationships in terms of sexual functioning, relationship satisfaction, sexual confidence and well-being. We found that relationship satisfaction was significant for men across genders and sexuality. For women, we found that relationships and sexual functioning were significant across genders and sexuality. We also found that perceived financial gain was reported more so by younger women dating older men and younger men who date older men. Outcomes favoured older adults dating younger adults, particularly among older women dating younger men. We still need to find out more about LGBTQIA+ age-gap relationships to guide psychosexual services in supporting these groups.

Introduction

What constitutes an age-gap relationship is subjective as it is difficult to ascertain at what point it violates socio-cultural convention (Lehmiller and Agnew., 2011). However, Lehmiller & Agnew (2006; 2007; 2008) suggest that age-gap relationships involve an intimate relationship where there is a significant age difference of around 7-10 years. According to Buss (1989), in Western societies, adult men prefer female partners younger than themselves, whilst women prefer dating older male partners. Further, men prefer partners approximately three years younger than women, who prefer partners approximately three years older (Buss, 1989). Men's dating preferences, which extend beyond 3 years, are approximately between 5 and 15 years, while women's (those who prefer dating older men) preferences are approximately 10 years and above (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). According to Ni Bhrolchain, M. (2006), as men age, the likelihood that they will date someone younger increases the age-gap for remarrying/partnering men. Traditionally, as women get older, they tend to date men with a narrower age-gap, which is further reflected in remarrying/partnering. Overall, individuals

asked how much of an age-gap would be acceptable; the standard average is a 10-year difference (Kenrick & Keefe., 1992). In a US census, approximately 9% of partnered couples are involved in an age-gap relationship (Lehmiller & Agnew., 2006). More recent data from the US has reported that approximately 22% of older women dating younger men (Proulx et al., 2006). Approximately 8% of couples in Canada are involved in an age-gap relationship (Boyd & Li, 2003). In same-sex relationships, 26% of males and 18% of females are engaged in an age-gap relationship (Boyd & Li., 2003).

Evolutionary and Social exchange theories on age-gap relationships

Evolutionary theory suggests that women and men invest in different resources (Buss, 1989; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). For men, they invest in security, shelter and food. According to this theory, women should be more attracted to these resources to ensure survival for themselves and their offspring. Further, as men age, they acquire more resources, and younger women become more attracted to them. According to this theory, this excludes older women who depend on men to support them financially. Reproduction from an evolutionary perspective also suggests older men's choice of a younger reproductive female. However, as men get older, levels of testosterone and sperm count become significantly reduced along with sex drive compared to those of a younger female. This question challenges evolutionary theory regarding the driving force of reproductive potential and age-gap preferences in men (Ni Bhrolchain, M. 2006). Social exchange theory posits that an older man providing resources for a young woman can be viewed as a social exchange. Similarly to evolutionary theory, men offer shelter, food, and security in exchange for women providing sex and, ultimately, procreation (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). However, this is based on the perceived equitable exchange, where equitable exchanges are necessary to avoid relationship conflict.

In Western society, women have less status (less employment payment/opportunities) than men, and therefore, women experience a less equitable outcome. However, Lehmiller (2006, 2007, 2008, 2011) suggests that women who date younger men might have a more equitable outcome and

relationship satisfaction than older men who date younger women. Possibly, there are higher levels of relationship equality associated with relationship satisfaction and “social exchange” in this context (e.g., Donaghue & Fallon, 2003). To expand, older women's relationships may be more financially secure and possess more power or confidence, making the relationship more equitable compared to younger women's relationships. According to Lehmillier (2011) relationship satisfaction is positively correlated with relationship equity. Unlike evolutionary theories on age-gap dating, the social exchange theory can accommodate diverse and mixed dating preferences. Outdated evolutionary theories also extend to LGBTQIA + communities. For example, a study examining newspaper advertisements among Men who have sex with Men (MSM) revealed they exhibited similar age preferences to heterosexual men (Hayes., 1995). A further study of 100 MSM in an intimate relationship examined relationship satisfaction, gender roles and equity comparisons (Fallon, Bowles, & Arísteguli., 2009). Higher levels of relationship satisfaction were associated with relationship equity and gender role self-stereotyping might be considered less relevant for this cohort.

Since this is not driven by reproductive necessity, it questions the evolutionary theory on age-gap dating preferences in this context. Perhaps the evolutionary theory needs to evolve further to understand more about age-gap dating among LGBTQIA+ communities. Indeed, economic shifts and increased gender equality have changed what is considered a ‘normal’ age-gap (Buss., 1989), and recent social justice movements have increased scrutiny of the shifts in power dynamics in age-gap relationships (Bishop., 2022).

Women who date younger men appear to face more judgment compared to younger women dating older men, owing to challenging mainstream assumptions about ageing women and their levels of sexual attractiveness and desire. However, a younger man who dates older women appears to hold kudos with the assumption that this is likely to be a financial transaction (Silva., 2019). Moore (2010) suggested that younger men are attracted to women's confidence and power, as these women are

already financially independent. Older women find younger men more fun and energetic. Regardless of gender or preferences, it is also essential to acknowledge that the younger person might financially support the relationship.

Alarie (2019) explored the discourses of older women who date younger men compared to a similar age group. They found that women felt more confident exploring their sexual needs and desires, sexual assertiveness, and pleasure, more so with younger men. Further, in a study of twenty-four participants (older women dating men approximately 7-10 years younger), they were found to have higher levels of emotional intelligence, sexual self-efficacy and subjective happiness compared to women who dated men of a similar age group (Thomas et al., 2023). Despite the small sample size, it nonetheless raised questions about preconceived notions about sexual desire and attractiveness among older women. The authors commented that the small sample and low recruitment of participants might reflect the opposing viewpoints towards women dating younger men, discouraging participation.

Limited and up-to-date research has looked at age-gap relationships between men and women and between same-sex relationships, particularly concerning relationship satisfaction, sexual function, sexual efficacy, and well-being. Regarding Lehmiller & Agnew's (2006; 2007; 2008) definition of an age-gap relationship, for this study, age-gap relationships refer to an age difference of around 7-10 years.

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses were developed: · There will be a relationship between age-gap relationships and relationship satisfaction, sexual function, sexual self-efficacy, and well-being. Levels of sexual satisfaction, sexual function, and well-being will vary between older women dating younger men, older men dating younger women, and same-sex age-gap relationships.

Methods

Design

This correlational design study used a snowballing technique to make a Microsoft survey available on social media sites, including TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit and LinkedIn.

Participants

The inclusion criteria included those aged 18 years and above when dating/marrying/partnering with a younger or older person. This was not a retrospective study; hence, participants were in an age-gap intimate relationship with someone approximately 7 years + older or younger when they participated in this study. There were no restrictions on relationship type, whether monogamous, non-monogamous, polyamory, or polyandry. There were no restrictions on gender, sexuality, or disability. The exclusion criteria were those aged below 18 years at the time of dating an age-gap relationship.

Out of 142 participant responses, 16 did not complete the survey correctly, so they were removed for statistical analysis, resulting in 126 participants. Of the 126 participants, n=33 (26.2%) were aged 18-30 years; n=64 (50.8%) were aged 31-50 years; n=22 (22.2%) were over 50 years, and 1 participant (0.8%) did not state their age. Regarding gender identification, n=39 (31.0%) identified as cis male; n=80 (63.5%) cis female; n=1 (.8%) gender queer; n=1 (.8%) non binary; n=1 (.8%) gender fluid/AFAB; n=1 (.8%) female and non- binary (transgender + male/intersex to female) and n=3 (2.4%) not stated. Concerning sexuality, n=82 (65.1%) identified as being straight; n=3 (2.4%) gay; n=4 (3.2%) pansexual; n=1 (.8%) polyamorous; n=2 (1.6%) same sex women/lesbian; n=20 (15.9%) bisexual; n=1 (.8%) queer; n=1 (.8%) asexual; n=1 (.8%) straight kinkster; n=1 (.8%) ambiguous, n=1 (.8%) fluid; n=1 (.8%) bisexual/pansexual/omnisexual and n=8 (6.3%) not stated. Ethnic groups included white n=83 (68.3%); African Caribbean n=9 (7.1%); Asian British n=7 (5.6%); n=2 (1.6%) Latino/Hispanic; n=17 (13.5%) mixed ethnicities; n=1 (.8%) Arab and n=4 (3.2%) not stated. Those dating a similar age did not participate in this study. Perhaps the advert encouraged age-gap relationships to participate

more than same-age dating groups. Based on an age-gap difference of 7 or more years, the breakdown of dating groups included younger women dating older men, n=41 (32.5%); older women dating younger men n=30 (23.8%); younger women dating older women n=2 (1.6%); older women dating younger women, n=1 (.8); younger men dating older women, n=14 (11.1%), older men dating younger women, n=21 (16.7%); younger men dating older men, n=6 (4.8%); older men dating younger men, n=1 (.8) and non-specified, n=10 (7.9%). Concerning the duration of the relationship, n=38 (30.2%) had been dating for/partnered < 6 months; n=14 (11.1%) 6-12 months; n=24 (19.0%), 1 - 2 years; n=18 (14.3%) 3 – 5 years; n=20 (15.9%) 6-10 years and n= 12 (9.5%) 10+ years. Much of the sample had no children, n=61 (48.4%) or between 1 - 2 children, n=46 (36.5%).

Materials.

Demographic information

This included relationship type, dating preferences, duration of relationship, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and number of children.

The Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI Rosen et al., 2000)

This is a 19-item measure of sexual pain, sexual desire, orgasm, lubrication, and sexual satisfaction with five response categories. Example questions include, "Over the past 4 weeks, how often did you experience discomfort or pain during vaginal penetration?" Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = .820$. For the current study, the Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = .995$.

Male sexual functioning Brief Sexual Function Inventory (BSFI) (O'Leary et al., 1995)

This is an 11-item questionnaire which focuses on sexual functioning, including sexual desire, arousal and satisfaction and erectile functioning. The response categories include 0= not at all to 5= always or 0= no problem to 5= big problem (this varied depending on how the question was worded). The Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = .992$.

Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick., 1988).

A 7-item scale designed to measure general relationship satisfaction. Respondents answer each item using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). The higher the score, the more satisfied the respondent is with his/her relationship. An example question is, "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" Cronbach alpha= 0.90. For the current study, the Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = .877$.

Adapted Sexual Self-Efficacy Scale (guided by Libman et al., 1985).

This is a 10-item questionnaire that focuses on sexual confidence and behaviour. The response categories include 1, the lowest level of self-efficacy, and 10, the highest. There are no reverse questions. Cronbach's alpha is $\alpha = 0.88$ (high). This questionnaire has been adapted to reflect the participants in a study looking at sexual self-efficacy and sexual function. Less than 5% of the original questionnaire remains. For the current study, the Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = .930$.

The Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) (Tennant et al., 2007).

A 7-item questionnaire with 5 response categories looking at functioning and feeling aspects of well-being. The response categories include 1=none of the time to 5=all of the time. Cronbach alpha- 0.89-0.91. There is no reverse scoring. Scores range from 7 to 35, with the latter having the highest level of well-being. An example question includes, "I've been feeling relaxed". For the current study, the Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = .858$.

Dating individuals' assessment (Adapted Thomas et al., 2023)

This 12-item questionnaire comprises a 6-option (0= Never/rarely 6 =exclusively) Likert scale that measures dating preferences. Being attracted to those younger has been based approximately on a 7-10-year age-gap. An example question is: "Younger men are more sexually attractive to me than men my age or older" For the current study, Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = .937$.

Dating Older Individuals' Assessment. This 12-item questionnaire comprises a 6-option (0= Never/rarely 6 =exclusively) Likert scale that measures dating preferences. Being attracted to those older has been based approximately on a 7-10-year age-gap. Example questions are: " I find older partners provide more stability than those who are younger or a similar age group." For the current study, the Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = .982$.

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted via a University ethics review panel and was guided under the British Psychological Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2017). Microsoft Survey link was shared on social media and recruited via snowball sampling. The ordering of the survey included the brief/information sheet, consent form, demographic questions, The Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI Rosen et al., 2000) or/and Brief Sexual Function Inventory (BSFI) (O'Leary et al., 1995), Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick 1988), Adapted Sexual Self-Efficacy Scale (guided by Libman et al., 1985), The Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) (Tennant et al., 2007), Dating younger individuals' assessment (Adapted Thomas et al., 2023) or Dating older individuals' assessment. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The information sheet contained details of the research study, including questions to contextualise the research. Participants were reminded that their responses would be confidential, and their identities would remain anonymous. Participants could withdraw their responses following the completion of the survey without giving any reason and without their legal rights being affected. Participants were reminded that their survey responses could be terminated up until data analysis post-submission. To ensure that all participants have the right to withdraw, the link was removed from social media at least two weeks before the beginning of the analysis.

Participants generated a personal identification number (PIN) to ensure anonymity. This PIN is a unique withdrawal and data modification identifier under GDPR (Data Protection Act (2018)). The

consent form reminded participants to take a record of their 4-digit code, so their survey could be sourced and terminated. A debrief form provided a list of supporting organisations for those needing additional support. All information will be stored for up to 5 years before being terminated.

Participant responses will be stored in OneDrive and destroyed after 5 years (Medical Research Council – (MRC., 2017, p. 7).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were conducted, followed by a correlation and a regression analysis. It was decided to conduct non-parametric data analysis due to assumption testing violations between groups and the small sample sizes in this study. A Kruskal- Wallis H test was conducted on data set comparisons between groups where there was evidence of a violation of assumption. Further, a Quade non-parametric ANCOVA was carried out to control for relationship duration and the impact this had on sexual functioning and relationship satisfaction. Pairwise comparisons via independent samples/Bonferroni were made with significant outcomes. The dependent variable was age-gap dating (data was continuous, including age-gap in years and categorical, including older vs younger variables for analysis), and the independent variables included sexual functioning, sexual self-efficacy, relationship satisfaction and well-being. Categorical age-gap groups were used in Kruskal-Wallis analyses, whereas regression models relied on a continuous age-gap variable.

Data analysis was carried out on SPSS 28.

Results

Significant outcomes have been included to ensure their conciseness.

Correlation Analysis based on continuous data

For self-defined male sexual functioning, significant results indicated a moderate positive correlation with age-gap relationships on male sexual desire, $r(126) = .571$, $p < .001$ (variance explained 33%) with erectile functioning, $r(126) = .558$, $p < .001$ (variance explained 31%) with ejaculation, $r(126) = .570$, $p < .001$ (variance explained 33%), with an evaluation of sexual functioning, $r(126) = .572$, $p < .001$ (variance explained 33%) and with sexual satisfaction, $r(126) = .533$, $p < .001$ (variance explained 28%).

For self-defined female sexual functioning, significant results indicated a moderate positive correlation with age-gap relationships on sexual desire, $r(126) = .491$, $p < .001$ (variance explained 24%), sexual arousal, $r(126) = .526$, $p < .001$ (variance explained 28%), lubrication $r(126) = .526$, $p < .001$ (variance explained 28%), orgasm $r(126) = .560$, $p < .001$ (variance explained 31%), sexual satisfaction $r(126) = .561$, $p < .001$ (variance explained 31%) and sexual pain, $r(126) = .560$, $p < .001$ (variance explained 31%). There was a low positive correlation between age-gap relationships and relationship satisfaction, $r(126) = .183$, $p = .043$ (variance explained 3%). The remaining variables were non-significant, where $p > .05$.

Regression Analysis based on the Correlation

Regarding self-defined male age-gap dating, the standardised residual appears to be in a reasonable range (-.868-3.281). Further, Cook's distance was .000 to .155 and Durbin-Watson of 1.691, suggesting that adjacent variables were not correlated and that the model could be generalisable across other samples. Concerning Table 1, the overall model was also significant ($F(6, 119) = 11.168$, $p < 0.001$). Regarding the standardised Beta coefficients, the regression analysis found that

relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.160$, $p < .001$) predicted self-defined male age-gap relationships. No other variable predicted age-gap dating where $p > .05$.

Regarding self-defined female age-gap dating, the standardised residual appears to be in a reasonable range (-1.652-3.307). Further, Cook's distance was .000 to .158 and Durbin-Watson of 1.645, suggesting that adjacent variables were not correlated and that the model could be generalisable across other samples. Concerning Table 1, the overall model was also significant ($F(7, 118) = 11.350$, $p < 0.001$). Regarding the standardised Beta coefficients, from the regression analysis, it was found that relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .189$, $p = .010$), sexual satisfaction ($\beta = .844$, $p = .012$) and sexual pain ($\beta = .679$, $p = .008$) were predictors of self-defined female age-gap relationships. No other variable predicted age-gap dating where $p > .05$. Table 1 only contains the significant predictors of age-gap relationships.

Table 1

Multiple regression analysis of relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction and sexual pain in relationship age-gap relationships

GOES HERE

Kruskal-Wallis H test comparing categorical age-gap groups with sexual functioning among men.

A Kruskal-Wallis H test was performed on scores of men dating older women, men dating younger women, men dating older men and men dating younger men on sexual desire, erectile functioning, ejaculation functioning, evaluation of sexual problems, sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, well-being and sexual self-efficacy. There were significant differences between the groups' relationship satisfaction, evaluation of sexual issues and ejaculatory functioning. The differences between rank totals of male age-gap dating on relationship satisfaction included men dating older women ($n=14$; 18.14), men dating younger women ($n=21$; 25.36), men dating older men ($n=6$;

13.00) and older men dating younger men (n=1; 38.00), $H(3, n=42) = 8.038, p = .043$. The differences between the rank totals of male age-gap dating in evaluating sexual functioning were significant. For men assessing their sexual functioning, the differences between the rank totals for men dating older women were (n=14; 18.54), men dating younger women (n=21; 26.21), men dating older men (n=6; 13.25) and older men dating younger men (n=1; 13.50), $H(3, n=42) = 7.950, p = .044$. The differences between the rank totals of age-gap dating on ejaculatory functioning were significant, where men dating older women (n=14; 14.89), men dating younger women (n=21; 27.62), men dating older men (n=6; 16.33) and men dating younger men (n=1; 16.50), $H(3, n=42) = 11.664, p = .009$. No other variables were significant, $p > .05$.

Pairwise comparisons yielded non-significant outcomes for relationship satisfaction between groups, $p > .05$. However, the evaluation of sexual functioning was highest in men who date younger women ($p = .044$) and concerns with ejaculatory functioning ($p = .023$) compared to the other groups. Men who date men were non-significant in evaluating their sexual functioning and ejaculatory functioning ($p > .005$).

Kruskal-Wallis H test comparing categorical age-gap groups with sexual functioning among women.

A Kruskal-Wallis H test was performed on scores of older women who date younger men, younger women who date older men, younger women who date older women and older women who date younger women on sexual desire, sexual arousal, lubrication, orgasm, sexual satisfaction, sexual pain, relationship satisfaction and well-being. There was a significant difference between the group's sexual arousal, orgasms, lubrication and sexual satisfaction. The differences between rank totals of older women dating younger men with sexual arousal included (n=30; 54.57), younger women dating older men (n=41; 25.61), younger women dating older women (n=2; 32.00) and older women dating younger women (n=1; 24.00), $H(3, n=74) = 32.404, p < .001$. The differences between rank totals of older women dating younger men with lubrication included (n=30; 54.57), younger women who date older men (n=41; 25.59), younger women dating older women (n=2; 32.00) and older women dating

younger women ($n=1$; 24.00), $H(3, n=74)=38.335$, $p<.001$. The differences between older women dating younger men's sexual satisfaction included ($n=30$; 53.53), younger women dating older men ($n=41$; 27.83), younger women dating older women ($n=2$; 7.25), older women dating younger women ($n=1$; 13.50), $H(3, 74)=30.867$, $P<.001$. The differences between rank totals of older women dating younger men's orgasms included ($n=30$; 51.98), younger women dating older men ($n=41$; 29.04), younger women dating older women ($n=2$; 6.50) and older women dating younger women ($n=1$; 12.00), $H(3, 74)=26.376$, $p<.001$.

Pairwise comparisons yielded significant outcomes with sexual arousal, lubrication, orgasms and sexual satisfaction between older women who date younger men and younger women who date older men, with older women dating younger men reporting higher levels of sexual arousal, $p<.001$. There were no significant differences between younger women dating older women and older women dating younger women, $p>.005$. Another significant outcome included the perception of financial stability and economic gain among younger women who date older men and younger men who date older men. Younger women dating older men ($n=41$; 74.22) and younger men dating older men ($n=6$; 73.92) were significant, $p<.005$. Outcomes were lowest among younger women who date older women ($n=2$; 32.00), with younger men dating older women ($n=14$; 35.00) and older women dating younger men ($n=30$; 32.60), $H(7, 113)=21.136$, $p=.004$. Pairwise comparisons remained significant, $p<.005$.

Kruskal-Wallis H test and ANCOVA comparing and controlling categorical age-gap groups with sexual functioning and relationship duration

The duration of the relationship between female lubrication and orgasms was significant. The rank differences between relationship duration and lubrication included < 6 months (n=38; 55.05), 6-12 months (n=14; 69.43), 2-5 years (n=18; 39.39), 6-10 years (n=20; 45.53) and 10 years + (n=12; 47.46), $H(4, n=102)=10.117$. $P=.038$. The rank differences between relationship duration and orgasms included < 6 months (n=38; 56.74), 6-12 months (n=14; 68.39), 2-5 years (n=18; 42.97), 6-10 years (n=20; 40.40) and 10 years + (n=12; 46.50), $H(4, n=102)=10.845$. $P=.028$. Pairwise comparisons remained significant where 6-12 months appeared optimum for lubrication and orgasms, $p<.05$.

A Quada non-parametric ANCOVA for controlling the duration of the relationship yielded significant outcomes for female sexual lubrication and orgasms and was significant for older women who date younger men, $p<.001$.

Discussion

This research aimed to examine age- gap relationships with sexual functioning, relationship satisfaction, sexual self-efficacy and well-being. The hypothesis was partially supported, where there was a relationship between age- gap relationships, relationship satisfaction and sexual functioning but no relationship with well-being and sexual self-efficacy. Collectively, for men, relationship satisfaction was a predictor of age-gap relationships and for women, relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction and sexual pain were predictors of age-gap relationships. Compared to younger men dating older women, older men dating younger women were more preoccupied with their sexual functioning and had higher levels of ejaculatory difficulties. However, the questionnaire for male sexual functioning did not specify whether this was rapid/premature or delayed ejaculation. Compared to older women dating younger men, women dating older men reported lower levels of sexual satisfaction, sexual arousal, lubrication and orgasms. Relationship duration was relative, where higher levels of lubrication and orgasms were reported among women in a relationship of 6 to 12

months compared to either longer or shorter relationship durations. Men dating men and women dating women appeared non-significant across variables, including the perceived financial/economic gain of dating older individuals. Perceived economic gain was perceived among younger women who date older men and among younger men who date older men.

Regarding relationship duration, in part, the findings in Lee & McKinnish's (2018) study align with the outcomes in this study, where men who are "married" to younger wives reported higher satisfaction levels and less satisfaction with similar age groups. Likewise, women appear more satisfied with younger than older husbands. Marital satisfaction declined with marital duration, more so in age-gap relationships than in similarly aged relationships. The authors attributed this to age-gap relationships being less resilient. However, the concept of resilience needs to be explored along with relationship expectations and needs. Limited research has looked at the different types of relationships among older adults. For example, "friends with benefits" or non-monogamous relationships remain unknown among this cohort. The literature frequently references marital couples, which in some ways restricts our understanding of the varied relationships that exist. Indeed, in this study, relationship satisfaction predominated between 6 and 12 months, particularly among older women dating younger men, where higher levels of lubrication and orgasms were reported.

The outcomes of this study, in part, further align with Cole & Francesconi's (2011) findings in that older adults prefer dating younger individuals, and the financial gains are highest among women dating older men than younger men dating older women. Interestingly, men who date older men also reported perceived financial gain. Women who date older women reported the lowest perceived financial gain. However, comparative research appears scarce in understanding the dynamics of same-sex relationships in this context. The outcomes in this study are at odds with Diaz-Gimenez & Giolito (2013), who suggest that older men and younger women's relationships are "generated" because fecundity declines more rapidly for women than men. According to this theory, women prefer to marry young and accept marriage proposals from older men, whose fertility, such as

testosterone, diminishes more slowly. Whilst evolutionary theory suggests that older men are biologically driven to pass their genes down to a younger woman where fecundity is higher (e.g. Kaplan Lancaster., 2003), biologically speaking, sexual function can become compromised among older groups, whether male or female (Hinchcliff et al., 2021). In this study, older men were more concerned about their sexual functioning, including ejaculatory. In fairness, this may have been rapid/premature, as having sex with a younger woman might be deemed more appealing. However, the literature consistently reports that ejaculatory delays are more frequently reported among older men owing to the drop in testosterone. However, this may result in a longer sexual duration towards climax (if that is the goal), which some “couples” may find more satisfactory.

These traditional evolutionary scripts posit that men invest in resources, including fecundity and women bond with men who possess these resources to support them and their children (e.g. Buss, 1989). This theory may explain why, in this study, younger women’s perception is that older men are more financially/economically secure, and the older men reported higher concerns with sexual function. However, this excludes career-driven women, where research suggests they want the same things as men (Moore, 2010). This may explain the sexual function outcomes in this study for both men dating younger women and older women dating younger men. Whilst younger men dating older women also had positive sexual function outcomes, it was evident that younger women dating older men's sexual functioning outcomes were significantly lower than older women dating younger men. This aligns with Silva's (2019) research in which younger women partnered with older men reported lower levels of sexual satisfaction, including less frequency of sex and orgasms. Compared to this study, Silva (2019) also found that there was limited open dialogue about sex. Moore (2010) also raises the interesting point of sex going beyond reproduction in terms of fertility, which is quite a narrow perspective of associating sex with fertility rather than one which extends through our lifespan. Indeed, the majority of participants in this study did not have children.

Concerning the social exchange theory, older women in this study were not perceived as much of an economic gain (Moore., 2010). Therefore, factors such as independence, power, and confidence might appeal more to the younger man, providing greater equality within the relationship (e.g. Donaghue & Fallon, 2003). How this translates to same-sex female couples has yet to be determined, but certainly, their financial/economic interest was lower compared to the other groups in this study.

Despite social opinions that women dating younger men remain more negative than older men dating younger women, women are becoming more career-driven. They are not restricted to levels of fertility in engaging in enjoyable sex. Indeed, outcomes favoured older women dating younger men across most sexual functioning areas, which appeared, in this cohort, not to be determined by financial/economic gain by their partners. Alarie (2019a, 2019b) found that younger men found the confidence of the older women and their openness to discuss sexual needs, along with their independence, attractive.

There are several limitations in this study. These included the assessment tools therein, such as the limitations of the self-report measures (Brenner & DeLamater., 2016), including their heteronormativity (Boyer & Lorenz., 2020). The current study encouraged LGBTQIA+ individuals to participate, but unfortunately, low recruitment rendered the sample size for comparative analysis challenging and non-representative. This may have been owing to the questionnaires used. The statistical output is therefore presented in a binary fashion, and working with assessment tools and statistics, which can remedy a more inclusive non-binary approach, requires development. In many ways, this statistical scoping exercise guided the team in perhaps repeating this research but targeting specific LGBTQIA+ groups rather than a collective. Whilst the sample size is sufficient for analysis, it was deemed too small for mediation analysis (Fritz & Mackinnon., 2007), and sample size differences between groups yielded areas for non-parametric analysis. Despite group sizes in some instances being very small (e.g., men dating younger men) and the statistical power being limited in

such circumstances, we decided to retain LGBTQIA+ individual groups in this study to emphasise the limited information on diverse people's age-gap relationships and a lever for future research.

The sample cannot be considered generalisable to the wider population. Still, it has raised the importance of older adult dating and sexual intimacy, which we hope encourages dialogue in addressing relationship variations among older adults, such as non-monogamy/polyamory/polyandry, which limited research appears to have addressed. This has an impact on how we look at age-gap relationships in psychosexual services and how health promotion and awareness can provide an inclusive assessment for older adults, along with those who identify as LGBTQIA+. Having more information on the age-gap relationship itself would be helpful. Future research might like to explore the nature of the age-gap relationship in more depth. For example, how might a 70-year-old dating a 50-year-old compare with a 70-year-old dating a 20-year-old? The younger women might have been peri or menopausal, which might have impacted sexual functioning and relationship satisfaction (Hinchliff et al., 2021). However, the age groups in the current study ranged from 18 to above 50 years old.

The outcomes for older women dating younger men were very interesting in this study, and research looking at the impact of dating a younger man during perimenopause/menopause vs. dating someone of a similar age group with symptoms and sexual outcomes needs exploring. Might age-gap dating among women be an adjunct antidote to menopausal symptoms, particularly in light of the level of perceived lubrication, orgasms and sexual satisfaction reported in this study? Research looking at whether lubrication results from HRT/bioidentical hormones or is naturally produced would be interesting. Outcomes for sexual self-efficacy and well-being were disappointing. Whilst no statistical significance was established, the outcomes were consistently high among all groups, though no relationship was established. Perhaps a larger sample may have produced different outcomes.

In conclusion, more information about diverse age-gap relationship preferences is needed, including relationship types such as monogamous vs non-monogamous relationships and among LGBTQIA+ communities. Not all individuals seek a long-term relationship; non-monogamy may be part of that. Stereotypes about older adults and their sexual functioning, along with lifestyle preferences, require a better understanding and certainly need to be open to discussion. Ultimately, this limits psychosexual practitioners working with age-gap relationships and the perceived expectations of these relationships. This might not be a lack of resilience in relationship duration, as suggested by the literature, but rather relationship preferences. Outcomes suggest that higher sexual and relationship satisfaction was reported by older adults who date younger individuals, in particular older women who date younger men. Finally, there needs to be a stronger LGBTQIA+ voice being represented in age-gap relationship research so a better understanding can be established, aimed at supplementing psychosexual services' understanding of working with diverse genders and sexual orientations. We hope that this research provides a foundation for future research to be conducted.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgement: We would like to thank the participant's contribution to this study.

References

Alarie, M. (2019a). Sleeping With Younger Men: Women's Accounts of Sexual Interplay in Age-Hypogamous Intimate Relationships. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 57(3), 322–334.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1574704>

Alarie, M. (2019b). "They're the Ones Chasing the Cougar": Relationship Formation in the Context of Age-Hypogamous Intimate Relationships. *Gender & Society*, 33(3), 463–485.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243219839670>

Assarzadeh, R., Bostani Khalesi, Z., & Jafarzadeh-Kenarsari, F. (2021). Sexual self-efficacy and its related factors among married women of reproductive age. *African Health Sciences*, 21(4), 1817–1822. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ahs.v21i4.39>. PMID: 35283942; PMCID: PMC8889826.

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191–215. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191>

Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2004). Sexual Economics: Sex as Female Resource for Social Exchange in Heterosexual Interactions. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8(4), 339–363. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0804_2

Bergstrom, T. C., & Bagnoli, M. (1993). Courtship as a Waiting Game. *Journal of Political Economy*, 101(1), 185–201. <https://doi.org/10.1086/261871>

Bishop, K., (2022). Age gaps: The relationship taboo that won't die. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/worklife/article/20220317-age-gaps-the-relationship-taboo-that-wont-die>
Accessed: 19/04/2025

Boyd, M., & Li, A. (2003). May-December: Canadians in age-discrepant relationships. *Canadian Social Trends*, 70, 29–33. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/11-008-X20030026634>

Boyer, S. J., & Lorenz, T. K. (2020). The impact of heteronormative ideals imposition on sexual orientation questioning distress. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 7(1), 91–100. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000352>

Brenner, P. S., & DeLamater, J. (2016). Lies, Damned Lies, and Survey Self-Reports? Identity as a Cause of Measurement Bias. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 79(4), 333–354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272516628298> PMID: 29038609; PMCID: PMC5639921.

British Psychological Society. (2017). *Ethics guidelines for internet-mediated research*. BPS. <https://www.bps.org.uk/guideline/ethics-guidelines-internet-mediated-research>

Buss, D. M. (1989). Sex differences in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 12(1), 1–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00023992>

Coles, M. G., & Francesconi, M. (2011). On the Emergence of Toyboys: The Timing of Marriage with Aging and Uncertain Careers *. *International Economic Review*, 52(3), 825–853.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2354.2011.00651.x>

Data Protection Act (2018). (n.d.). *Data Protection Act 2018. Legislation Government UK*. [Text].

Retrieved 23 September 2024, from <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/12/section/1>

Donaghue, N., & Fallon, B. J. (2003). Gender-Role Self-Stereotyping and the Relationship Between Equity and Satisfaction in Close Relationships. *Sex Roles*, 48(5), 217–230.

<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022869203900>

Barry J Fallon, B.J., Bowles, T & Aristequili, I., (2009). The Effect of Gender-role Self-stereotypes and Social Comparison on the Relationship between Equity and Satisfaction. Conference paper.

Accessed: 20/02/2025.

Fritz, M. S., & MacKinnon, D. P. (2007). Required Sample Size to Detect the Mediated Effect.

Psychological Science, 18(3), 233–239. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01882.x>. PMID: 17444920; PMCID: PMC284352.

Hayes, A. F. (1995). Age preferences for same- and opposite-sex partners. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 135, 125-133.

Hendrick, S. S. (1988). A Generic Measure of Relationship Satisfaction. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 50(1), 93–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/352430>

Hinchliff, S., Lewis, R., Wellings, K., Datta, J., & Mitchell, K. (2021). Pathways to help-seeking for sexual difficulties in older adults: Qualitative findings from the third National Survey of Sexual

Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3). *Age and Ageing*, 50(2), 546–553.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ageing/afaa281>. PMID: 33507242; PMCID: PMC7936020.

Kaplan, H. S., & Lancaster, J. B. (2003). An Evolutionary and Ecological Analysis of Human Fertility, Mating Patterns, and Parental Investment. In *Offspring: Human Fertility Behavior in Biodemographic Perspective*. National Academies Press (US). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK97292/>

Kenrick, D. T., & Keefe, R. C. (1992). Age preferences in mates reflect sex differences in human reproductive strategies. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 15(1), 75–91.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00067595>

Lee, W.-S., & McKinnish, T. (2018). The marital satisfaction of differently aged couples. *Journal of Population Economics*, 31(2), 337–362. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-017-0658-8>. PMID: 31598035; PMCID: PMC6785043.

Lehmiller, J., & Agnew, C. (2011). May-December Paradoxes: An Exploration of Age-Gap Relationships in Western Society. *Department of Psychological Sciences Faculty Publications*.

<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/psychpubs/27>

Lehmiller, J. J., & Agnew, C. R. (2006). Marginalized Relationships: The Impact of Social Disapproval on Romantic Relationship Commitment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(1), 40–51.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167205278710>

Lehmiller, J. J., & Agnew, C. R. (2007). Perceived Marginalization and the Prediction of Romantic Relationship Stability. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(4), 1036–1049.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00429.x>

Lehmiller, J. J., & Christopher, R. A. (2008). Commitment in Age-Gap Heterosexual Romantic Relationships: A Test of Evolutionary and Socio-Cultural Predictions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*,

32(1), 74–82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.2007.00408.x>

Libman, E., Rothenberg, I., Fichten, C. S., & Amsel, R. (1985). The SSES-E: A Measure of Sexual Self-Efficacy in Erectile Functioning. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 11(4), 233–247.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00926238508405450>. PMID: 4078907.

Medical Research Council – (MRC., 2017, p. 7).<https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MRC-100323-RegulatorySupportCentre-RetentionFrameworkResearchDataRecords.pdf>

Accessed: 23/09/2024

Moore, F. (2010). “Financially independent women more likely to make cougars”. MensXP.

<https://www.mensxp.com/buzz-on-web/lifestyle/2063-financially-independent-women-more-likely-to-make-cougars-.html> . Accessed: 21/09/2024

Ní Bhrolcháin, M. (2006). *The age difference between partners: A matter of female choice?* (C. Sauvain-Dugerdil, H. Leridon, & N. Mascie-Taylor, Eds.; pp. 289–312). Peter Lang.

<http://www.peterlang.com/index.cfm?VID=10785&vLang=E&vHR=1&vUR=2&vUUR=1>

O’Leary, M. P., Fowler, F. J., Lenderking, W. R., Barber, B., Sagnier, P. P., Guess, H. A., & Barry, M. J. (1995). A brief male sexual function inventory for urology. *Urology*, 46(5), 697–706.

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0090-4295\(99\)80304-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0090-4295(99)80304-5)

Proulx, N., Caron, S. L., & Logue, M. E. (2006). Older Women/Younger Men: A Look at the Implications of Age Difference in Marriage. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 5(4), 43–64.

https://doi.org/10.1300/J398v05n04_03

Rosen, C. Brown, J. Heiman, S. Leib, R. (2000). The Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI): A Multidimensional Self-Report Instrument for the Assessment of Female Sexual Function. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 26(2), 191–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/009262300278597>

Silva, T. (2019). "Daddies," "Cougars," and Their Partners Past Midlife: Gender Attitudes and Relationship and Sexual Well-Being among Older Adults in Age-Heterogenous Partnerships. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 5, 237802311986945.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119869452>

Tennant, R., Hiller, L., Fishwick, R., Platt, S., Joseph, S., Weich, S., Parkinson, J., Secker, J., & Stewart-Brown, S. (2007). The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS): Development and UK validation. *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes*, 5(1), 63. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1477-7525-5-63>. PMID: 18042300; PMCID: PMC2222612.

Thomas, M., Banbury, S., Lusher, J., & Chandler, C. (2023). Age-hypogamy, emotional intelligence, sexual self-efficacy, and subjective happiness associations. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 1–12.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2023.2280561>