

Age-hypogamy, emotional intelligence, sexual self-efficacy, and subjective happiness associations.

Abstract

Research examining age-gap relationships is sparse, particularly on women who date younger men. Using a content analysis consisting of non-parametric statistical analysis, we investigated age-hypogamy (with male partners approximately 7-10 years younger) and age homogamy with levels of emotional intelligence (E.I.), sexual self-efficacy (SSE), and subjective happiness (S.H.). Twenty-four women were recruited via social media platforms. Seventeen women in age-hypogamy relationships had a Mean age = 45.86 years (SD = 4.47), and seven women in age-homogamy relationships had a Mean age = 42.34 years (SD = 9.04) with an age range for both groups between 25-57 years. Results suggested that age-hypogamy relationships scored higher on levels of E.I., S.H., and SSE when compared to women in age-homogamy relationships. Since SSE, E.I. and S.H. are associated with fulfilling intimate relationships, this study questions the preconceived notion that age-hypogamy relationships are any less fulfilling or successful than those in age-homogamy relationships. Future research among a larger and more diverse cohort is needed to confirm the unique qualities of this population.

Keywords: age-hypogamy, age-homogamy, emotional intelligence, sexual self-efficacy, subjective happiness, content analysis.

Lay Abstract

Society tends to view women who date younger men more critically than older men who date younger women. There needs to be more research in the literature looking at older women who date younger men, and we wanted to understand more about the qualities of these women compared to women who date men of a similar age group. "Cougar" is often used to describe a woman who exclusively dates men at least 7-10 years younger. In a sample of 24 women, 17 women were dating men approximately ten years younger than themselves, and 7 were in similar age-similar relationships. We compared these groups with levels of emotional intelligence (E.I.), sexual self-efficacy (SSE) and subjective happiness (S.H.). We found that "Cougars" had higher scores among these measures than women in age-matched dating groups. Since SSE, E.I. and S.H. are associated with fulfilling intimate relationships, this

study questions the preconceived notion that women in relationships with younger men are any less fulfilling or successful than those in similar relationships. We argue that further research is needed to understand the age gap in dating among couples, including the development of suitable interventions that extend to sexuality and relationship-diverse individuals.

Introduction

Excluding age differences involving issues of consent, what constitutes an age gap relationship is subjective as it is difficult to ascertain at what point it violates social convention (Lehmiller and Agnew., 2011). Nonetheless, Lehmiller and Agnew (2006; 2007; 2008) suggest that age-gap relationships tend to be around 7-10 years. This estimate might vary across cultures, given that some African countries have documented normative age gap differences of this magnitude (United Nations, 2000). In a United States census, approximately 7.2% of age gap relationships involve an older man, and 1.3% involve an older woman (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). In 1963, 15% of U.K. brides were older than their grooms (Carvel, 2003). This increased when more women followed their careers first; by 1998, this figure had increased to 26%. By 2011, a further study found that this figure had almost tripled since the 1970s for women who married or cohabitated with a younger man five or more years younger (Coles & Francesconi, 2011). Similarly, in the U.S., approximately 22% of weddings yearly involve older women with younger husbands (Proulx et al., 2006). In same-sex relationships based in Canada, 26% of male same-sex couples and 18% of female same-sex couples are compared to heterosexual couples in age-gap relationships (Boyd & Li, 2003).

The concept of an older man dating a younger woman might, for some, appear societally more palatable than older women dating younger men. However, both types of relationships have come under scrutiny whereby men who date younger women have been referred to as “cradle snatchers” and younger women dating older men being called “gold-diggers” (Turner., 2008). Nonetheless, women who date younger men have been viewed more critically in society as they challenge some of the gendered expectations regarding appropriate sexual desire and behaviour (Silva., 2019). Women who date younger men can be referred to as "cougars". A somewhat predatory term, a "cougar", is often used to label older females who seek a relationship or relationships with younger men, often referred to as "toy-boys" or "cubs" if between 7 and 10 years younger than their female partner (Pemberton.,

2011). Ziegler and Seskin (1979) suggested that women who date younger men believe it keeps them feeling younger. Cougar also refers to women who are said to be more attracted to younger men owing to their fresh looks, energy, optimism, enthusiasm for life, and level of fun (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2008; Watson & Stelle, 2011). Indeed, Moore (2010) suggested that "Cougars" are more likely to be financially independent and target younger men who find sexually attractive rather than targeting men for their financial status.

It is common for couples to have an age gap of approximately 3-5 years (Lehmiller & Agnew., 2011). However, an age gap of 10 years or above in couples is generally not perceived to be the norm. This may be due to societal norms not encouraging open dialogue or encouraging such relationships. One explanation for this might be due to the sexual scripts learned throughout our life course (Alarie., 2019a and b). To expand, a sexual script refers to our sexual desires and practices learned through different cultural interactions with others (Gagnon and Simon., 1973). Additional scripts include interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts, an individual's fantasies. Sexual scripts vary concerning gender (e.g., Wells & Morrison, 2013); for example, traditional cultural scripts involve men being the sexual agents on which sexual desires are acted, whereas women are the sexual objects who derive gratification from being the passive recipients (e.g., Ramsey and Hoyt, 2015). According to Morokoff (2000), compared to men, women are discouraged from being sexually assertive and confident, with female orgasms having lower status (Séguin et al., 2018).

In a discourse analysis examining the sexual scripts of 55 women aged between 30 and 60 who were dating younger men, the traditional cultural heterosexual scripts for sexual desire and ability were examined (Alarie., 2019a, 2019b). Alarie (2019a) found that compared to dating men the same age or older, women felt they could explore sexual desire, sexual assertiveness, and pleasure more intimately with younger men, disrupting traditional cultural scripts. Remnants of the cultural script permeated their sex life, where the focus had centred on penile-vaginal intercourse. Qualities of a younger man that supported women's desire, exploration, and pleasure all centred on stamina, including erectile stamina. The women's perceptions of the man's interest in an older woman altered the power dynamics, further enhancing the sexual experience. Indeed, Winn (1991) argued that greater equality in a relationship tends to make couples happier and more satisfied.

Linked to sexual confidence, desire, and exploration is Sexual Self-Efficacy (SSE). The term has been adapted from self-efficacy, a social cognitive theory that refers to an individual's beliefs in their ability to exert control via motivation over any given situation (Bandura., 1977, 1982). SSE is one's belief to make decisions about their sexual desire and behaviour with confidence and to avoid high-risk sexual behaviour with general sexual wellness (Bandura & Watts, 1996; Khalesi et al., 2017). High SSE has also been associated with confidence before and after sexual activities and can increase pleasurable and enjoyable sex (Khalesi & Bokaie, 2018). In contrast, low SSE is associated with compromised self-confidence before and after a sexual act. Lower levels of sexual self-efficacy have been associated with interpersonal difficulties such as depression and performance anxiety (Shahram et al., 2010). According to Lotfi (2013), increasing levels of sexual efficacy can support well-being and sexual functioning and has been shown to increase marital/relationship satisfaction. Further, in one study, high levels of SSE have been associated with higher libido, orgasm, and sexual satisfaction among all age groups and genders (Ali Akbari et al., 2010). In a study including 352 partnered individuals in Iran, SSE, emotional intelligence, marital satisfaction, and happiness were measured in a correlational study in which SSE, sexual satisfaction, happiness and emotional intelligence were predictors of marital satisfaction (Roshan., 2019).

Subjective happiness or well-being consists of emotional and cognitive components (Sato et al., 2015). According to Diener., (1984), subjective happiness consists of high life satisfaction, positive feelings, and infrequent negative feelings. There is also an established link between subjective well-being/happiness and sexual satisfaction. For example, in a longitudinal study based in Germany among n=12,105 participants aged 40 and above, levels of life satisfaction and sexual satisfaction were measured (Buczak-Stec, König and Hajek., 2019). Outcomes suggested a direct relationship between life and sexual satisfaction among men and women. The authors suggest that increasing sexual satisfaction could support healthy ageing and well-being.

An added component to relational satisfaction and well-being/happiness is emotional intelligence. Emotional Intelligence (E.I.) is a set of skills used to perceive, understand, and regulate our moods (Nasiri et al., 2014). With EI, we can improve our cognitive functioning (Mayer et al., 2008). According to Bar-On and Parker (2014), E.I. develops over time and can be developed through interventions targeting E.I., including counselling. In relationships,

E.I. refers to emotional awareness and the ability to communicate feelings and emotions effectively (Neo, 2019). Research suggests that lower levels of emotional intelligence in a relationship are often associated with higher levels of conflict, where higher levels of relationship dissatisfaction are reported (Brackett et al., 2005).

A meta-analysis based on a total of 603 participants found a significant yet moderate association ($r = .32$) between trait emotional intelligence and romantic relationship satisfaction (Malouff et al., 2014). This was apparent in the individuals' perception of their E.I. and relationship with their partners. A further meta-analysis examining the relationship between E.I. and relationship satisfaction based on 90 effect sizes from 78 samples found an overall correlation of 0.37. Extending this to sexual well-being, Burri, Cherkas, and Spector (2009) suggested a positive relationship between E.I. and the frequency of orgasms during intercourse and masturbation among women. The authors suggested that lower levels of E.I. among women may compromise feelings of control and confidence/efficacy during sex, thus reducing levels of sexual satisfaction along with the number or quality of orgasms (Burri et al., 2009).

Research is scarce when exploring age-gap relationships, particularly age-hypogamy relationships. This study aims to understand more about these women and how they compare with women whose relationships are age homogamy. This research concept was mainly influenced by Alarie's (2019a,b) discourse analysis on the sexual scripts of women who date younger men; Roshan's (2019) study into the relationship between marital/relationship satisfaction with SSE, S.H., and E.I.; and, Malouff et al.'s, (2014) meta-analysis looking at E.I. and romantic relationship satisfaction. Based on this review of the existing literature, the present study aimed to establish whether an association exists between SSE, E.I., and S.H. among women who date men younger than them.

Method

Design

A content analysis using non-parametric statistical data analysis (Marcondes and Marcondes., 2018) via purposive sampling examined the relationship between age-hypogamy (at least 7-10 years younger) and age homogamy relationships with SSE, E.I., S.H. A Google Form survey was developed where a link to the study contents was accessible via Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Reddit and Twitter.

Participants

Out of 32 responses, 24 female participants completed a Google Form survey. Seventeen participants consisted of age-hypogamy (Mean age = 45.86, SD = 4.47), and seven were age homogamy (Mean age = 42.34, SD = 9.04). The age range for both groups was between 25 to 57 years. All participants were heterosexual and currently in an intimate relationship.

The exclusion criteria were anyone in a relationship with an older man (>5 years) and those unable to read and write English.

Materials

A Google Form was used to develop the online research survey and advertisement to promote the research study via social media sites (LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook). Four questionnaires were administered: an adapted SSE questionnaire (Libman et al., 1985), E.I. (Schutte et al., 1998), and Subjective happiness scale (SHS, Lyubomirsky, & Lepper, (1999), and woman-older dating, "cougar" questionnaire, designed for this study.

Sexual self-efficacy

Libman et al. (1985) sexual self-efficacy questionnaire is a 15-item instrument adapted for this study. Participants' responses were measured via a 10-item scale of 1-10. It is a 15-item questionnaire with response options 1 (Low confidence) – 10 (High confidence/ sexual self-efficacy). An example question is, “Do you feel sexually desirable to your partner? Or others if single? The Cronbach’s alpha for this study is ($\alpha = .879$).

Emotional intelligence

The Schutte Self Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT Schutte et al., 1998) is conceptualised in the trait tradition. It consists of 33 questions with 5 response options, 1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The Cronbach alpha for Emotional intelligence is ($\alpha = .900$). The Cronbach alpha for this study is .809. An example question is, "By looking at their facial expressions, I recognise the emotions people are experiencing" and "I have control over my emotions".

Subjective happiness scale

The Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) 4-item instrument focuses on the self and happiness. The scale consists of a 7-item option response, with 1 being the lowest level of happiness and 7 being the highest. The Cronbach alpha ranges from .79 to .74. This measurement has also shown a strong test-retest of .55 to .90. The Cronbach alpha in this study was $\alpha = .624$.

"Cougar" questionnaire

This 13-item questionnaire comprises a 6-option (0= Never/rarely 6 =exclusively) Likert scale that measures dating preferences. Older women's attraction to younger men has been based approximately on a 7-10-year age gap with younger men. Example questions are: "Younger men are more sexually attractive to me than men in my age group or older", and "Dating younger men gives me a sense of independence and equality in my relationships". The Cronbach alpha for this questionnaire was .872. The validity of the test was conducted via KMO and Bartlett tests. The results suggested 13 valid items with a loading factor of more than 0.50 (based on 24 participants- see limitations).

Procedure

This study was approved by the University Research Ethics Review Panel and was conducted under the BACP Code of Ethics (2018) and the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct 2017. A Google Form survey link was available on social media sites (LinkedIn, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Reddit). The ordering of the survey consisted of a briefing statement, consent form, SSE questionnaire (Libman et al., 1985), E.I. (Schutte et al., 1998), Subjective happiness scale (SHS, Lyubomirsky & Lepper, (1999), and woman-older dating, "cougar" questionnaire. This was followed by a debrief form that provided options for support.

Participants were informed that the research would take approximately 15-20 minutes. Participants were requested to provide a unique, memorable 4-digit code. The 4-digit self-generated code ensured complete anonymity and confidentiality regarding participant responses. The consent form reminded participants to record their survey code so that it could be identified and their data terminated should they wish. All data were stored on a password-protected site under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act (2021).

Statistical analysis

Cronbach's alpha was conducted on the questionnaires used to determine their reliability on the current sample. A factor analysis was conducted on the woman-older dating questionnaire. Outcomes suggested sound psychometric properties; however, with such a small sample size, this would need to be repeated with at least 300 participants to confirm validity (Fields., 2018). A Kruskal-Wallis H compared SSE, E.I., and S.H. levels between women-older and age-homogeneous relationships.

SPSS 26 was used to carry out all statistical analyses.

Results

There were significant differences between age-hypogamy and age-homogamy groups across all variables, E.I., $\chi^2(1) = 8.157, p = .004$ with mean rank scores of 7.36 age-hypogamy and 15.27 age homogamy; SSE $\chi^2(1) = 6.278, p = .012$ with mean rank scores 8.00 age-hypogamy and 14.92 age homogamy and SHS, $\chi^2(1) = 7.029, p = .008$ with mean rank scores 7.79 age-hypogamy and 15.04 age homogamy.

Discussion

This study focused on older women's relationships with younger men. Mainly, associations between emotional intelligence, sexual self-efficacy, and subjective happiness among age-hypogamy and age-homogamy groups were explored. Higher levels of E.I., SSE and S.H.

were reported among age-hypogamy than among age-homogamy groups. To our knowledge, this research is the first of its kind. Hence, minimal comparative research is currently available. However, like Roshan (2019), the present study found a positive relationship between E.I., SSE, and S.H. Roshan (2019) suggested that S.H. and SSE directly affected marital satisfaction. Sexual satisfaction and E.I. indirectly affected marital satisfaction and mediated the relationship between S.H. and SSE on couple satisfaction. Whilst Roshan's study was a mediation analysis, unlike content analysis applied in the current study with a notably smaller sample size and based on age-homogenous married couples, the outcome of these studies is nonetheless comparable. This might suggest that regardless of the relationship status or cultural background of the individual, couple satisfaction responds favourably to E.I., SSE, and S.H. However, E.I. varies across cultures, and examining couples from different cultural backgrounds (mixed couple relationships) requires further exploration.

Similar to the findings in this study, research has also established a relationship between SSE sexual and relationship satisfaction, along with subjective happiness (e.g., Vaziri et al., 2010). SSE is a multidimensional construct that provides protective qualities in sexual functioning, sexual desire, sexual confidence, and sexual performance (Soodkhoriet al., 2019). A systematic review of SSE suggested a significant positive relationship between SSE and marital/relationship satisfaction (Assarzadeh et al., 2019). Indeed, higher levels of SSE were associated with varied positive sexual experiences (Assarzadeh et al., 2019).

Notably, those who were divorced appeared to have higher levels of SSE than those partnered. Research is limited on whether SSE has a role in divorce, and this study did not include partner status in the demographics. According to previous research, women often do not wish to remarry (Watson & Stelle, 2011) and companionship has been very much highlighted as a reason for dating younger men by older women (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986; Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Dickson et al., 2005). Increasingly, unmarried older adults enter partnerships/relationships (de Jong Gierveld, 2004), and this increase in unmarried individuals suggests the availability of potential partners, whether a friend with benefits or a more committed relationship.

According to Davidson (2001), women view dating as a social activity that provides companionship that cannot be obtained through women alone. Further, women want close relationships but with autonomy, without marriage or cohabitation, compared to men

(Davidson., 2001). Indeed, there has been an increase in women using male sex workers, indicating a change in relationship dynamics (Scott et al. (2014). Future research on women-older relationships might determine whether this cohort is more likely to be divorced and what the relationship divorce might have with SSE in romantic partnerships. Additionally, looking at the longevity of these age-difference relationships to identify whether there is a preference for short or long-term relationships with younger men would be of interest.

For those married/partnered, higher levels of SSE have been associated with long relationships with higher levels of communication and intimacy (Assarzadeh et al., 2019). A significant component of SSE is sexual satisfaction, consisting of different experiences such as thoughts, behaviours, feelings, and beliefs (Assarzadeh et al., 2019). Additionally, sexual technique, duration, connection, and dialogue all impact sexual satisfaction (Soodkhori et al., 2019). Another concept that affects sexual satisfaction is sexual self-disclosure. This depends on communication and openness to sexual desires and fantasies between the couple. Associated open communication and dialogue is E.I. In this study, this was the highest among age-hypogamy than age-homogamy groups. It has been suggested that with age comes increased levels of E.I. (Chen et al., 2016), and the age-hypogamy group were older, perhaps explaining the higher levels of E.I.

Whether the relationship is short or long-term, monogamous or non-monogamous, E.I. is associated with relationship satisfaction. Indeed, Malouff et al. (2013) highlighted the association between an individual's E.I. and their partner's level of satisfaction in relationships. Couples low on E.I. experienced poor relationship outcomes compared to couples where one or both partners were high in E.I. To support this, higher relationship satisfaction, E.I., expressing one's needs, plays an active role during sex. Maturity is often associated with E.I., and "Cougars" appear to know what they want concerning their relationships and life satisfaction. An exciting study by Chen, Peng and Fang (2016) examined the relationship between S.H./well-being and ageing mediated by E.I. among 360 Chinese participants. Outcomes suggested that E.I. partially supported the relationship between age and S.H./well-being and fully mediated the relationship between age and S.H./well-being. The findings suggested that older adults with higher levels of E.I. can use their E.I. to increase S.H./well-being.

Whilst inconsistent, some studies have suggested that women have higher levels of SSE. This might be associated with sexual practices, sexual caution and sexual desire and confidence. It has also been suggested that as a woman gets older, her sexual confidence increases.

However, status and focus remain on male ejaculation and orgasm rather than women's sexual needs and desires (Armstrong et al., 2000). Whilst these cultural scripts are slowly changing, they still permeate Western societal expectations of women's sexual roles, where sexual assertiveness and exploration remain discouraged.

Evolutionary theories on age and relationships have arguably reinforced these traditional scripts. According to this theory, men tend to invest in resources such as security, food, and shelter, and women are attracted to men who possess these resources to support them and their children (e.g., Buss., 1989). From an evolutionary perspective, pairing older men with younger women is favourable since younger women have higher fertility levels, and men have increased resources and comparatively stable fertility. This does not account for career-driven women, straight and gay men with broad age range sexual preferences (e.g., Ni Bhrolchain., 2006). Moore (2010) found that the dating preferences of women who become more financially independent become more like men who possess these resources. Further, younger women in relationships with older men have reported lower levels of sexual satisfaction, including less frequency of sex and orgasmic problems and limited open dialogue about sex than those in age-homogenous relationships (Silva., 2019). An additional consideration is that as fertility diminishes with age, perhaps sexual pleasure and experimentation go beyond mechanical reproduction (e.g. Moore., 2010).

Social exchange theory (Baumeister and Vols., 2004) appears to favour older men dating younger women, with a cost-to-benefit ratio for all involved where men have more power than women. Examining the social exchange theory might yield a more favourable outcome when looking at the cost-to-benefit ratio of older women with younger men. Older women, such as finances, power, and confidence, might be more established. This might provide more equality within the relationship, providing greater satisfaction (e.g., Donaghue and Fallon, 2003) and commitment (e.g., Winn, Crawford, & Fischer, 1991). In Alarie's (2019) study, younger men who date older women expressed how attractive they found them in terms of how confident they are with their appearance and how assertive and expressive they are in bed and were not afraid to voice their needs. Similarly, in this study, younger men were preferred as they found them more open-minded, and it was easier for them to express their

sexual desires and fantasies with the age-hypogamy group without fearing being judged (Armstrong et al., 2012).

These findings should be considered in the context of some limitations of the present study. In addition to the limitations associated with using self-report measures, recruiting participants was problematic, challenging, and ultimately too low to be considered generalisable to the broader woman-older-relationship populace (Tipton et al., 2015). Whilst speculative, low participant recruitment might have been due to the stigma associated with being an older woman dating a younger man. Interestingly, compared to the outcomes in this study, Silva (2019) found that older women partnered with younger men displayed higher odds of having an unhappy relationship than those in same-age relationships. However, Silva (2019) highlighted that this could be due to the stigma surrounding these age-gap relationships. Age-heterogenous partnerships are still imbued with gender inequalities that reflect women's devaluation in society, especially older women (Alarie 2019a, 2019b; Warren, 1996).

The available assessment tools for age gap dating remain minimal, so we purposely developed an assessment tool for this study. Despite having sound psychometric properties, the sample size included, could not guarantee reliability or validity. A detailed demographic measure within the survey to identify cultural specifications would improve this research, clarifying relationship types, status, ethnicity, and sexuality. Nonetheless, the outcomes of this study were interesting and warranted further exploration.

In conclusion, little research has examined the relationships between E.I., SSE, and S.H. in age-hypogamy and age-homogamy relationships. E.I., SSE, and S.H. levels appeared higher in age-hypogamy than in age-homogamy relationships. This research's outcomes were thought-provoking and provided a pathway for future research. A qualitative study examining women's experiences dating younger men with their partners would illuminate the dynamic between older women's relationship and their partners (Alarie, 2019). Future research among a larger and more diverse cohort of age-gap couples is needed to provide more information on this group's unique qualities compared to age-homogenous relationships. Perhaps developing suitable E.I. and SSE interventions would support age-gap couples in counselling that extends to sexuality and relationship-diverse people.

There is no conflict of interest.

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