# Exploring cougar territory: A qualitative examination of mature women's aging experiences while in long-term relationships with younger men

Sara Brushett, BSc (Hons) Health Promotion, School of Health and Human Performance



# BACKGROUND

# Psychosocial Aging

- Aging is more than physiological change, and includes important psychosocial aspects.<sup>1</sup>
- Positive and negative age stereotypes impact healthand behaviour-related outcomes. Negative age stereotypes have a greater impact than positive ones. 2-4
- New concepts of aging are emerging, such as the cougar phenomenon.

# Cougar Phenomenon

- A "cougar" is a colloquial term used to describe an older/middle-aged woman who has romantic relationships with a relatively younger man. <sup>5,6</sup>
- Term is predominantly perceived with negative or mixed connotations (i.e., predators, aggressors); however, positive connotations are identified (i.e., embracing women's sexuality).
- Cougars are an interesting group as they counteract a number of age stereotypes and social norms of aging.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1. What are the positive and/or negative aspects of the term "cougar" in regards to older women dating younger men"?
- 2. What are the perceptions and experiences of aging within intimate long-term relationships between mature woman and younger men?

# **METHODS**

# Participants & Recruitment

- Inclusion Criteria: Females who are, or have been, in a relationship with a younger man (broadly defined).
- Purposeful and snowball sampling: Online recruitment on two cougar dating websites and on Reddit.

# Data Collection & Analysis

- Qualitative: One-on-one, semi-structured, interview with three participants.
- Interviews: Conducted over the phone or by Skype.
- Audio recordings: Transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis done through constant comparison method.

# RESULTS

# **Participants**

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

	Location	Age	Partners Age	Relationship	"Cougar" Perception
<b>P1</b>	Sydney, Australia	51	35*	Open	Negative
<b>P2</b>	California, USA	33	29*	Monogamous	Positive
<b>P3</b>	Kanchanaburi, Thailand	46	30	Monogamous	Negative

Note: \*Previous experience dating other younger male partners.

# Research Question 1: Cougars

- Cougar: Defined as an *older* woman that *pursues* a younger man (P1, P2, P3).
- **Positive:** Women taking agency over their sexuality (P2); older women being desired provides hope to younger women worried about aging (P2); men may enjoy being approached by women (P1).
- **Negative:** Women preying on younger men (P3); aggressive (P1, P2); hardened and bitter (P1); wearing heavy makeup (P1, P2); smokes cigarettes (P1); dressing overly sexy (P1, P2).

# Research Question 2: Aging Experiences

Figure 1. Participant experiences with aging and age differences in their relationship(s).

### Aging:

- "It's scary because I feel that our society places so much emphasis on women's youth and beauty. I'm scared about aging... I'm scared about becoming irrelevant" (P2).
- "He looked probably even younger than 30, and I felt quite weird. He would always want to take me to bars, with young people... I felt funny, and really looking around I don't think people were looking at us; but, I felt like they might" (P1).
- "The first time I was aware of aging was when I was 29 surrounded by teenage athletes at a Muay Thai gym" (P2).

"It's tough... you still feel the same inside and then you see your body changing... It's kind of surprising" (P3).

• "The Thai are lighthearted and very accepting of our relationship... I'm not sure how it would be if we lived overseas" (P3).

Relationship:

### Community

Socio-Cultural

• "I look at all these young men who are just like, 'I just really want to date a cougar.' Then, I'm like, 'oh there is still hope!' People won't just dismiss me when I'm older" (P2).

### Interpersonal

• "I think it's important to have friends across the generations" (P2).

• "I've been surprised that the younger

### Individual

men that I've gone out with have seemed to be attracted to me, you know, physically and stuff. That's something that... I think you always worry about, no matter what your age is or not" (P1).

# RESULTS

# Research Question 2: Aging Experiences

- Awareness of age-related experiences: Described as both biophysical and psychosocial change (e.g., wrinkles, weakness; letting go of fear).
- Preventing aging: Mitigation of biophysical change (e.g., wearing sunblock to prevent wrinkles).
- Accepting aging: Psychosocial change expressed as self-acceptance and embracing life (e.g., being okay with who they are).
- Gender: Aware that aging is a gendered experience.

  Men thought to become more distinguished with age, whereas women become more undesired.

# DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

- Similar to findings from previous literature,<sup>5,6</sup> the term "cougar" was found to be predominantly negative, although some positive connotations were described.
- Culture, social norms of aging, and social norms of gender are intimately intertwined with participants' awareness, experiences, and actions related to aging.
- Simultaneously reactive to biophysical change and proactive to psychosocial change, participants not afraid to break social norms in their lives or in their romantic relationships with younger men.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### Thank you!

- Honours Supervisor: Dr. Brad Meisner.
- Honours Coordinator: Dr. Karen Gallant.
- Second Reader: Dr. Jacqueline Gahagan.
- REACH-U team.
- HPRO/LEIS 4101/4102 classmates and HAHP family.

# **CONTACT INFORMATION**

• S.Brushett@dal.ca

# REFERENCES

- 1. Levy, B. (2009). Stereotype embodiment: A psychosocial approach to aging. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *18*(6), 332-336.
- 2. Levy, B. R., Pilver, C., Chung, P. H., & Slade, M. D. (2014). Subliminal strengthening: Improving older individuals' physical function over time with an implicit-age-stereotype intervention. *Psychological Science*, *25*(12), 2127-2135.
- Meisner, B. A. (2012). A meta-analysis of positive and negative age stereotype priming effects on behavior among older adults. *Journals of Gerontology Series B:Psychological Sciences & Social Sciences*, 67B(1), 13-17.
- Levy, B. R., Zonderman, A. B., Slade, M. D., & Ferrucci, L. (2012). Memory shaped by age stereotypes over time. *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences & Social Sciences*, 67(4), 432-436.
- 5. Alarie, M., & Carmichael, J. T. (2015). The "Cougar" phenomenon: An examination of the factors that influence age-hypogamous sexual relationships among middle-aged women. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 77(5), 1250-1265.
- 6. Montemurro, B., & Siefken, J. M. (2014). Cougars on the prowl? New perceptions of older women's sexuality. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 28, 35-43.