

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

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## BACKGROUND

### Psychosocial Aging

- Aging is more than physiological change, and includes important psychosocial aspects.<sup>1</sup>
- Positive and negative age stereotypes impact health- and behaviour-related outcomes. Negative age stereotypes have a greater impact than positive ones.<sup>2-4</sup>
- 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).<sup>6</sup>
- 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
P1	Sydney, Australia	51	35*	Open	Negative
P2	California, USA	33	29*	Monogamous	Positive
P3	Kanchanaburi, Thailand	46	30	Monogamous	Negative

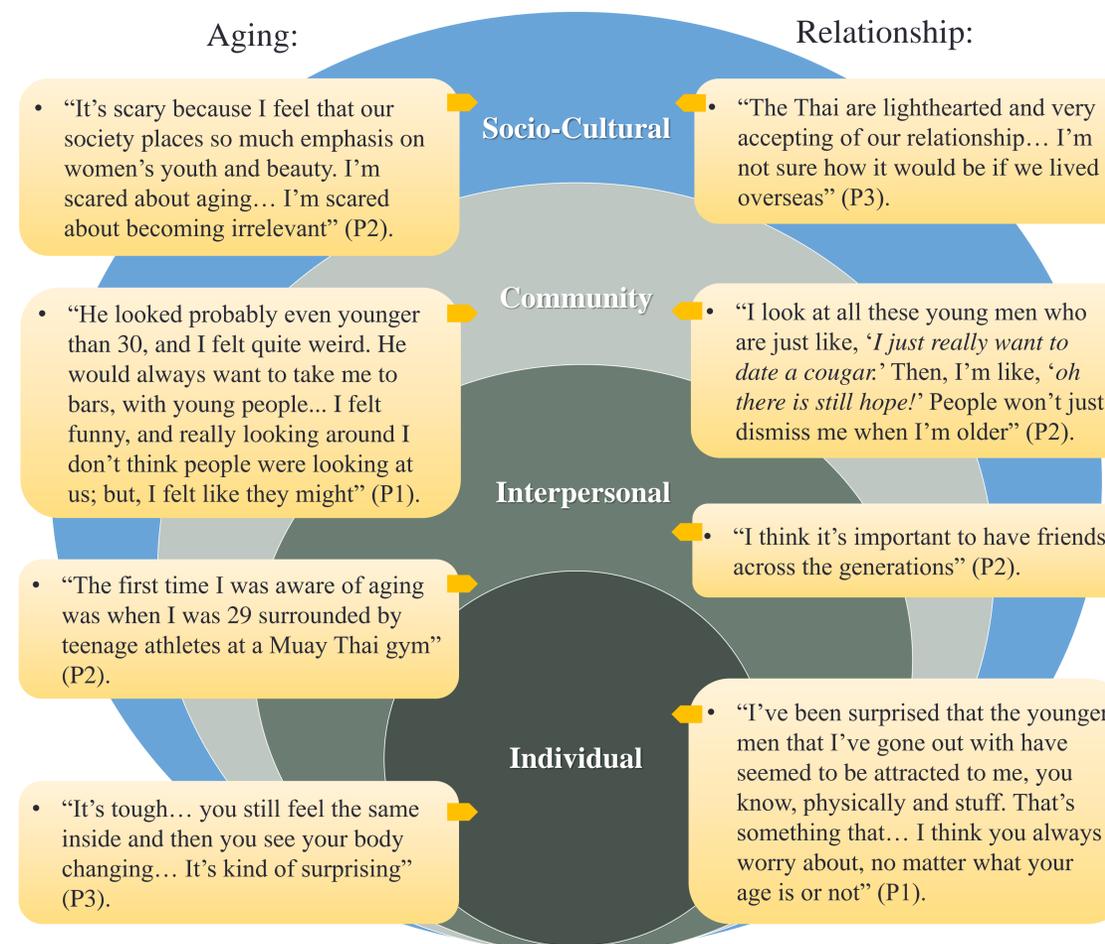
Note: \*Previous experience dating other younger male partners.

### 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).



## 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.

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## CONTACT INFORMATION

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