

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.¹
- Positive and negative age stereotypes impact health- and 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.^{5,6}
- Term is predominantly perceived with negative or mixed connotations (i.e., predators, aggressors); however, positive connotations are identified (i.e., embracing women's sexuality).⁶
- 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

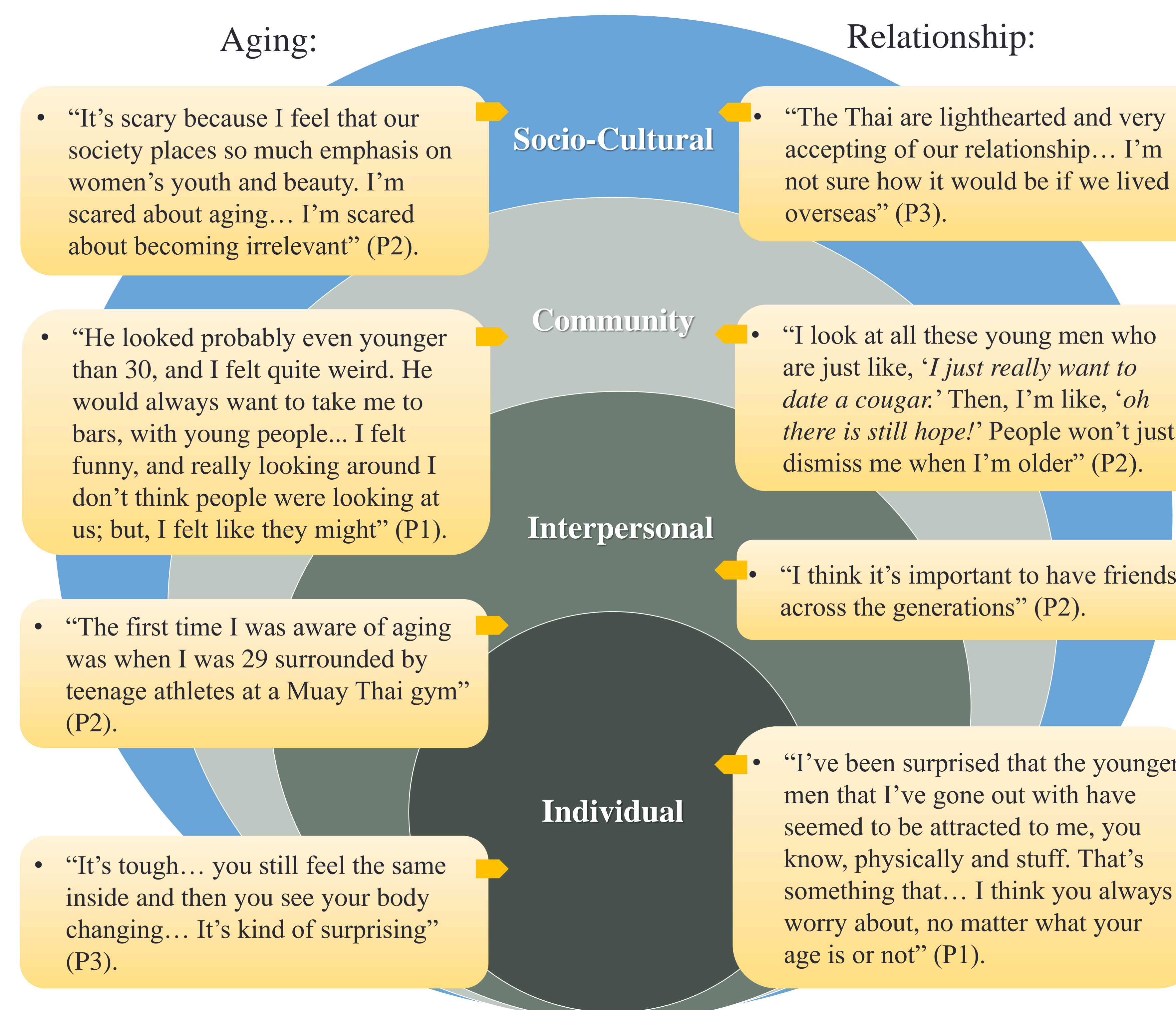
Note: *Previous experience dating other younger male partners.

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,^{5,6} 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.

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