

**BEYOND THE ‘COUGAR’ STEREOTYPE:
WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES WITH AGE-HYPOGAMOUS INTIMATE
RELATIONSHIPS**

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, women dating younger men have received a considerable amount of media attention. Commonly referred to as ‘cougars’, these women are presented as disregarding traditional gender norms concerning dating and sexuality. They are often imagined as highly desiring, sexually assertive women who actively seek out and seduce younger men, and as engaging in temporary flings without interest in long-term committed relationships. There has, however, been very little research to-date on women’s (and men’s) experiences with such ‘age-hypogamous’ intimate relationships.

The overarching research question guiding this study is: How do women experience age-hypogamous intimate relationships in the heterosexual dating context? In order to explore this issue, I conducted, in 2015, 59 semi-structured interviews with Montreal women aged 30-60 who date younger men. I found that women engaged in age-hypogamous intimate relationships often reproduce rather conventional gendered expectations for female behavior and traditional assumptions about their value as intimate partners. Indeed, most women present themselves as having played a rather passive role in the relationship formation process, and many of them struggle with resisting the traditional conception of women’s worth as long-term partners as ultimately associated with their youthful physical appearance and their reproductive capacities/childrearing aptitudes. Nevertheless, they also challenge many aspects of the traditional, culture-level sexual script dictating women’s sexuality. Depicting themselves as sexually empowered women, their choice of younger partners is motivated in part because they want to have partners who appreciate highly desiring, sexually assertive women, and because they want to ensure that their sexual pleasure be attended to.

Furthermore, through a comparison of women in their 30s, 40s and 50s, I found some differences of experiences among women along the lines of age, which I explained by the fact that younger and older participants differed with regard to: (a) the extent to which they are affected by the societal discourse indicating that women's value decreases with age; (b) the extent to which they fear being criticized for presenting themselves as sexually desiring; (c) whether they perceive younger men to fetishize older women like themselves (or not); (d) their dating goals, specifically whether they wish to eventually move in with/marry their partner and/or have (more) children; and finally, (e) their perceptions of the desirability of single men their age.

By taking a look at an understudied intimate relationship form such as age-hypogamous relationship, this dissertation improves our understanding of the factors influencing women's reproduction/rejection of gendered scripts for heterosexual dating and sex. It also contributes to the partner selection body of literature, by improving our understanding of the considerations influencing women's choice of partners and their decision to develop (or not) a long-term intimate relationship with someone. Furthermore, by comparing the experiences of women of different ages, this dissertation contributes to clarifying how women's aging influences their dating and sexual behavior. Finally, it also elucidates the extent to which the cultural representations of 'cougars' or age-hypogamous intimate relationships correspond to what real women who date younger men experience.

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, il y a eu un intérêt marqué dans les médias pour les femmes entretenant des relations de nature amoureuse et/ou sexuelle avec des hommes plus jeunes qu'elles. Communément étiquetées comme étant des « cougars », ces femmes sont présentées comme défiant les normes de genre traditionnelles en matière de sexualité et de relations intimes. Elles sont souvent imaginées comme ayant un grand appétit sexuel et comme étant des femmes entreprenantes qui cherchent activement à rencontrer des hommes plus jeunes et qui prennent le devant dans le processus de séduction. Elles sont aussi souvent dépeintes comme recherchant de brèves aventures et comme ayant peu d'intérêt pour les relations sérieuses à long-terme. Cependant, il existe à ce jour très peu d'études au sujet de l'expérience des femmes (et des hommes) ayant des relations intimes hypogamiques en termes d'âge.

La question de recherche ayant guidé cette étude est : Quelles sont les expériences vécues des femmes vivant sans conjoint qui entretiennent des relations de nature sexuelle et/ou amoureuse avec des hommes plus jeunes? Afin d'explorer cette thématique, j'ai mené, en 2015, 59 entrevues semi-structurées avec des femmes vivant sans conjoint âgées de 30 à 60 ans résidant dans la grande région de Montréal qui ont un (ou des) partenaires sexuels et/ou amoureux plus jeunes qu'elles. J'ai constaté que dans leurs interactions avec les hommes plus jeunes qu'elles rencontrent, ces femmes adoptent bien souvent des comportements traditionnellement féminins et reproduisent souvent, malgré elles, certaines idées préconçues quant à leur valeur en tant que partenaire. En effet, la plupart des femmes se présentent comme ayant joué un rôle plutôt passif durant le processus initial de formation de leurs relations hypogamiques en termes d'âge et plusieurs ont de la difficulté à résister au discours sociétal dominant indiquant que la valeur des femmes en tant que partenaire est ultimement associée à leur apparence physique et à leurs capacités

reproductives/ aptitudes parentales. Toutefois, elles déstabilisent aussi plusieurs des prescriptions relatives à la sexualité féminine que l'on retrouve dans le script sexuel hégémonique au plan culturel. Se décrivant comme étant particulièrement émancipée sexuellement, ces femmes légitiment leurs choix de partenaires plus jeunes entre autres en indiquant qu'elles désirent avoir des partenaires qui apprécient les femmes ayant un grand appétit sexuel et étant capables de s'affirmer dans les moments d'intimité et en insistant sur le fait qu'elles veulent maximiser leur plaisir sexuel.

De plus, en comparant le discours des femmes dans leur trentaine, quarantaine et cinquantaine, j'ai noté des différences marquées entre les femmes de différents âges quant à leurs expériences avec les hommes plus jeunes. J'avance que les femmes plus âgées diffèrent des plus jeunes sur plusieurs points, ce qui affecte inévitablement leurs expériences en matière de relations hypogamiques en termes d'âge. J'argue qu'afin de comprendre les différences entre femmes de différents âges quant à la façon dont elles décrivent leurs relations intimes avec les hommes plus jeunes, il faut considérer les points suivants : (a) le discours sociétal indiquant que la valeur des femmes diminue en vieillissant; (b) l'acceptation sociale envers le choix des femmes âgées de se présenter publiquement comme sujet de désir; (c) la perception que les femmes se font des intentions des hommes qui les approchent, à savoir si elles croient être un objet de fantasme; (d) les objectifs qu'elles ont en matière de relations intimes, plus précisément à savoir si elles désirent éventuellement emménager avec leur partenaire, se marier et devenir mère (à nouveau); et finalement, (e) leurs perceptions quant à la désirabilité des hommes de leur âge.

En explorant les relations hypogamiques en termes d'âge, un format de relations intimes encore peu étudié, cette thèse contribue à une meilleure compréhension des facteurs influençant la capacité des femmes à modifier les scripts hégémoniques en matière de formation de relations

intimes et de sexualité. Cette thèse contribue de façon importante à la littérature relative au processus de sélection de partenaires et ce, en précisant le type de considération influençant les choix de partenaire des femmes et leurs décisions de développer ou non des relations à long-terme avec leurs partenaires. De plus, en comparant les expériences des femmes de différents âges, cette thèse permet de mieux saisir la façon dont le vieillissement influence les comportements des femmes en matière de choix de partenaires, de développement des relations intimes et de sexualité. Finalement, cette étude permet de clarifier si les représentations culturelles des « cougars » que l'on retrouve fréquemment dans les médias reflètent la réalité.

I've had the shit kicked out of me for my entire career, and a large part of that is because I'm female and also because I refuse to live a conventional life. I've created a very unconventional family. I have lovers who are three decades younger than me. This makes people very uncomfortable.

-Madonna, in Harper's Bazaar 2017¹

INTRODUCTION

Less than two decades ago, the expression ‘cougar’ surfaced in popular language as a term used to describe middle-aged women engaging in intimate relationships with younger men (Collard, 2012; Lawton & Callister, 2010; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014). Since then, there has been growing interest for intimate relationships where the woman is older than her male partner, which I refer to as age-hypogamous intimate² relationships. While one can find traces of media curiosity for such relationships before the 21st century — for instance, with the production of movies such as *The Graduate* (1967), *Harold and Maude* (1971), or *My Tutor* (1983) — images of and discussions about such relationships have been particularly present in the media in the last 20 years (Lawton & Callister, 2010).

For instance, television shows such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Cougar Town* (2009-2015), *Lipstick Jungle* (2008-2009) and *Riverdale* (2017- ongoing), or movies such as *Prime* (2005), *The Rebound* (2009), *Adore* (2013) and *The Boy Next Door* (2015) all present middle-aged women having intimate relationships with younger men. There have also been reality television shows

¹ Harper's Bazaar (January 2017) Madonna's Spring Awakening- *The pop icon on election-night prayers, aging, and bad wine*. Available online:

<http://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a19761/madonna-interview/>

² In this study, I use the term ‘intimate relationships’ as a conceptual umbrella that includes all relationships in which the two partners are romantically and/or sexually involved, regardless of their commitment level and regardless of whether they have had sex together. This concept includes sexless dates, “hookups” as well as long-term relationships.

focusing on age-hypogamous intimate relationships such as the dating show *The Cougar* (2009) as well as documentaries on the topic such as *Extreme Cougar Wives* (2012) and *Amour Cougar: Au-delà du mythe* (2018). The image of the seductive older woman is also often commonly used in pornographic videos, and ‘cougars’ or ‘MILFs’ are now also common sub-genres on pornography websites (Vannier, Currie, & O’Sullivan, 2014).

In the last two decades, there has also been a proliferation of books intended to help older women in their search for younger intimate partners, such as *Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men* (Gibson, 2002) or *Dating the Younger Man: Guide to Every Woman's Sweetest Indulgence* (Targosz, 2009). There are now many dating websites dedicated to individuals seeking age-hypogamous intimate relationships, such as cougarlife.com, olderwomendating.com, and dateacougar.com. One can also easily find dozens of Facebook pages and groups celebrating ‘cougars’ or ‘MILFs’ (i.e. an acronym that means “Mother I’d like to fuck”) and intended to facilitate connections between older women and younger men (Aoun, 2013). In fact, one can now easily find information on ‘cougars’ on the internet, as there are hundreds³ of web pages providing definitions for the term ‘cougar’, elaborating on the motives of men and women who choose age-hypogamous intimate relationships, and/or offering advice to individuals interested in such unconventional relationships.

Age-hypogamous intimate relationships: Prevalence and longevity

While there has been a lot of discussion in the media about women who engage in age-hypogamous intimate relationships, the current empirical knowledge on such relationships is quite limited. We do know that age hypergamy in heterosexual relationships is the most common partnering format

³ On February 2, 2018, a Google search for the terms “cougar women” yielded 9,520,000 results.

in North America (and around the world), as most women couple with (slightly) older men. In the U.S., the 2016 Census revealed that husbands are at least two years older than their wives in 51.4 percent of marriages. In comparison, only 14.5 percent of marriages involved a wife who was at least two years older than her husband (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2016a). It also indicated that in 31.8 percent of marriages, the husband was at least four years older than his wife, and that 7.4 percent of marriages were comprised of a man who was at least 10 years older than his wife. In comparison, only 7.9 percent of marriages were comprised of a wife who was at least four years older than her husband, and in only 1.7 percent of marriages was the wife at least 10 years older (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2016a).

One can find similar patterns in Canada. Indeed, an analysis of the 2001 Canadian Census⁴ revealed that in 36 percent of heterosexual marriages/common law unions in Canada, the man was at least four years older; in comparison, 6 percent of marriages/common law unions involved a woman who was at least four years older than her spouse (Boyd & Li, 2003). It also showed that in 7 percent of Canadian marriages/common law unions, the man was at least 10 years older; the woman was at least 10 years older in only 1 percent of such unions (Boyd & Li, 2003). Nevertheless, in Canada as well as in the U.S., the age gap between heterosexual married/common law partners is most often rather small, ranging between one and three years (Boyd & Li, 2003; Institut de la Statistique du Québec, 2016; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2016a), meaning that women generally marry men who are slightly older than them.

⁴ Although it would have been useful to have more recent statistics on the prevalence of age-hypogamous and age-hypergamous marital/common law unions in Canada, no scholar has yet analyzed that data found in a more recent census and calculated the prevalence of these types of unions.

While age-hypergamous marriages are much more common than marital unions where the wife is significantly older, studies indicate that there have been variations in prevalence across time. For instance, while the average age gap today between men and women is two years at first marriage in Canada and in the U.S. (Darroch, Landry, & Oslak, 1999; Vanier Institute of the Family, 2010), at the beginning of the twentieth century the average gap was 3.5 years in Canada and 4 years in the U.S. (England & McClintock, 2009; Vanier Institute of the Family, 2010; Vera, Berardo, & Berardo, 1985). Furthermore, in the U.S., age-hypogamous marital unions were more common at the beginning of the twentieth century than it has been in the last four decades (Atkinson & Glass, 1985; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000, 2016a). Indeed, in 1900, 15.8 percent of women had married a man at least 5 years younger than them compared to 3.1 percent in 1980 (Atkinson & Glass, 1985). An analysis of U.S. Census data shows that the proportion of women marrying a man at least four years younger has slightly increased since the beginning of the 21st century, from 6.3 percent in 2000 to 7.9 percent in 2016 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000, 2016a).

If one considers all types of intimate relationships — from one-night stands to marital/common law unions — one can find a higher proportion of women who have younger male partners. However, age-hypogamous relationships are still much less common than age-hypergamous intimate relationships. For instance, based on the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), Alarie and Carmichael (2015) found that approximately 13 percent of U.S. sexually active women aged 35-44 years old had sex at least once with a man at least five years their junior in the last 12 months, and less than 5 percent with a man at least 10 years younger. In comparison, one-in- three women had a sex partner who was at least five years older than them, and 14 percent had a partner who was 10 or more years older than them. To my knowledge, there have not been similar studies

conducted in Canada recently; therefore, we do not know how many Canadian women choose younger men as their sex partner.

As for the longevity of age-hypogamous intimate relationships, there are inconsistencies in the literature as to whether these types of relationships are more or less likely to last compared to similar-age or age-hypergamous relationships. Studies conducted in the 1990s showed that both age-hypergamous and age-hypogamous married couples (using a five-year age gap definition) were more likely to divorce than similar-age couples (Hall & Zhao, 1995), or that the chance of divorce was higher when the wife was older than when the husband was older (Gentleman & Park, 1994). More recent studies found no significant relationship between age heterogamy (either age hypergamy or age hypogamy) and the likelihood of divorce (B. Wilson & Smallwood, 2008). Studies also show that for many women, age-hypogamous intimate relationships are not merely flings. Indeed, using the 2002 NSFG, Alarie and Carmichael (2015) calculated that roughly 54 percent of age-hypogamous relationships (using a five-year age gap definition) started at least two years prior to the interview, and that more than two out of five women in age-hypogamous relationships were married or cohabitating with their younger partner.

Further complicating the question of age-hypogamous intimate relationships' longevity potential is the fact that some studies indicate that both types of age-heterogamous marriages are not different than similar-age marriages with regards to the quality of their relationships (Vera et al., 1985), while other studies show that partners in age-hypogamous intimate relationships (using a 10-year age gap definition) report the highest levels of romantic satisfaction and commitment compared to both age-hypergamous and similar-age relationships (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2008). In fact, England, Allison, and Sayer (2016) found that women were significantly more likely to ask for divorce if they were at least three years younger than their husband compared to if they were

at least three years older. However, men were more likely to leave their wives if they were in an age-hypogamous marital union (using a three-year age gap definition) than if they were in an age-hypergamous marriage.

Two qualitative studies (Proulx, Caron, & Logue, 2006; Warren, 1996) exploring women's perceptions of disadvantages related to age-hypogamous intimate marital unions indicate that women often report fear of stigma and doubts with respect to their own physical attractiveness. Proulx et al. (2006) also asked their participants to report the positive aspects they associated with being in an age-hypogamous intimate marriage. Many of the female participants reported that their younger husband kept them active, and that they enjoyed going against traditional gender roles. While these two studies relied on rather small samples of individuals engaged in age-hypogamous marital unions — i.e. eight couples in Proulx et al.'s study, and 15 individuals (seven men and eight women) in Warren's study — they provide important insights into the dynamic of age-hypogamous marital unions.

Who chooses younger men as intimate partners?

In addition to statistical data on the prevalence of age-hypogamous intimate relationships in North America, we also have a general portrait of the socio-demographic factors that influence the likelihood of engaging in age-hypogamous intimate relationships for women. First, studies show that a woman's age is an important factor influencing the likelihood of her sleeping with a younger man (Alarie & Carmichael, 2015; Darroch et al., 1999; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Levesque & Caron, 2004) and of her marrying a younger man (Dressel, 1980; Wheeler, 1987). For instance, when analysing the main intimate relationship women were involved in, Darroch et al. (1999) found that roughly 3 percent of women aged 20-24 had a sex partner who was at least three years younger, whereas the proportion increased to 15 percent for 40-44 year old

women. Using the 2002 NSFG, Alarie and Carmichael (2015) also found support for a positive relationship between a woman's age and the likelihood that she has sex with a man at least five years her junior.

Considering that married women's partnering choices might reflect their preferences at an earlier age, it is pertinent to exclude women in long-term relationships from the analysis and only look at single women to see how their choices of sex partners change as they age. When looking at non-marital and non-cohabitational heterosexual sexual relationships U.S. women have had in the last year, Laumann et al. (1994) found that as they get older, single women were increasingly likely to opt for younger sex partners. Indeed, their analysis revealed that the common assumption that women tend to choose older men as their sex partner was true only for single women in their 20s or 30s; unlike younger women, single women over 40 years old were as likely to sleep with an older man as they were with a younger man. Similarly, based on a sample of 3,501 single men and women aged 40-69, Montenegro (2003) found that 19 percent of heterosexual female respondents reported that their current or last dating partner was at least five years younger, compared to 16 percent who reported that their partner was at least five years older.

A woman's marital status also influences the likelihood of her having a younger intimate partner. Indeed, Alarie and Carmichael (2015) found that among sexually active 35-44 years old U.S. women, those who were previously married were more likely to report having had sex with a younger man in the past year than married/cohabiting women. On the other hand, never-married women were equally likely to have a younger sex partner when compared to married/cohabiting women. Whether it is one's first or second marriage seems to also affect the likelihood for women of being in an age-hypogamous marriage/common law union. For instance, Shehan, Berardo, Vera, and Carley (1991) found that U.S. women in their second marriage were roughly seven times more

likely than women in their first marriage to be in a marital union where they are at least five years older than their husbands. In Canada, the 2001 Census revealed that women were previously married in 75 percent of age-hypogamous heterosexual common law unions⁵ (using a 10-year age gap definition) but only in 25 percent of similar-age unions (Boyd & Li, 2003).

With regards to the influence of a woman's socioeconomic status on her choices of intimate partners, both studies on age discrepancy in marriage (Boyd & Li, 2003; Vera et al., 1985) and in all types of intimate relationships combined (Alarie & Carmichael, 2015) show that age-hypogamous relationships are more common among women with low family income. In fact, based on the data found in the 2002 NSFG, Alarie and Carmichael (2015) found that there is a negative relationship between a woman's family income⁶ and age-hypogamous sexual relationships (using a five-year age gap definition). Studies show that for women, low levels of education are associated with both types of age-heterogamous marriages/common-law unions: age hypergamy *and* age hypogamy (Atkinson & Glass, 1985; Boyd & Li, 2003). However, when considering all types of intimate relationships, a woman's level of education does not influence the likelihood of having a sex partner who is at least 5 years her junior (Alarie & Carmichael, 2015).

⁵ The data was not available for married couples.

⁶ Since information on individual income was not available in the 2002 NSFG, Alarie and Carmichael relied on family income for their analysis.

‘Cougars’ as deviants

While one can find variations in terms of cultural representations of age-hypogamous intimate relationships⁷, ‘cougars’ are often imagined as highly desiring, sexually assertive women middle-aged women who actively seek younger male partners, approaching and overtly seducing them (Aoun, 2013; Barrett & Levin, 2014; Collard, 2012; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014). They are commonly presumed to be looking for ‘fun’ and to see their relationships with younger men as temporary flings (Kaklamanidou, 2012; Tally, 2006). Furthermore, women who date younger men are often presented as women who strive to correspond to strict, ageist conceptions of female beauty which equates beauty in women with youthful appearance and slimness (among other qualities) (Aoun, 2013; Barrett & Levin, 2014; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Weitz, 2010).

For instance, among the first pages one sees when searching for “cougar women” on Google are Askmen.com and Wikipedia. The writers for Askmen.com offer the following information about ‘cougars’: “Older, single women have been dubbed "cougars" for a reason: they're felines (females) who hunt younger men. As such, cougars are an interesting and unusual breed of women. They seem to want what men want: sex with no strings attached. [...] [A cougar] dresses quite suggestively, often younger than her age — she wants desperately not to look middle-aged”⁸. As for Wikipedia, it describes ‘cougars’ as “put-down for older women who would go to bars and go

⁷ It is worth noting that in several movies where part of the storyline is about an older woman meeting a younger intimate partner, the younger man is portrayed as the one who pursued the older woman. This is the case, for instance, in movies such as *The Rebound* (2009) or *Something's Gotta Give* (2003). Comparing the representations of women who date younger men found in various media sources Kaklamanidou (2012) found that ‘cougars’ found in television shows differed from those found in movies; in television shows, women who date younger men were commonly portrayed as predators, rather than respectable older women involved in loving relationships based on mutual respect and sexual attraction.

⁸ See https://ca.askmen.com/dating/player_100/143_love_games.html

home with whomever was left at the end of the night”, and/or as applying to older women “who aggressively pursue sexual relations with men in their 20s or 30s”.⁹

Importantly, there are conflicting messages regarding the acceptability for middle-aged women to choose younger men as intimate partners. On one hand, positive cultural representations of women dating younger men can be found in the media (Aoun, 2013; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Neumann, 2011). For instance, in the famous television show *Sex and the City* (1998—2004), 40-something Samantha — who is depicted as an ambitious, educated, confident and sexually empowered woman — finds herself dating a handsome and supportive 20-something model and aspiring actor named Smith, a man who later becomes her serious boyfriend and who remains by her side when she has to go through chemotherapy in order to fight cancer (Kaklamanidou, 2012).

Analyzing the content of 97 Facebook pages dedicated to ‘cougars’ and ‘MILFs,’ Aoun (2013) also found that the description attached to these pages tended to depict these women using positive qualifiers. Women interested in younger men were described as confident, financially independent, and physically attractive, and they were celebrated for their sexual experience and assertiveness. It is also worth noting that a recent study on women’s perceptions of age-hypogamous intimate relationships revealed that some women (although not a majority) perceive the ‘cougar’ as an independent, confident, sexually liberated woman (Montemurro & Siefken, 2014).

On the other hand, there is also often a negative undertone attached to cultural representations of ‘cougars’ (Collard, 2012; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Lawton & Callister, 2010), and most women find the expression derogatory (Montemurro & Siefken, 2014). Indeed, women dating younger men are more often described in the media as using a somewhat aggressive approach to seduction, and their

⁹ See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cougar_\(slang\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cougar_(slang))

behavior is often presented as ultimately dangerous for younger men and/or for themselves (Collard, 2012; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Lawton & Callister, 2010). Furthermore, these women are commonly depicted as clinging desperately to their youth and/or their ability to sexually attract men (Barrett & Levin, 2014; Kaklamanidou, 2012). In other words, they are frequently imagined as victims of the cultural imperative for women to find value in their physical appearance and in their capacity to trigger sexual desire in men. Women are also encouraged not to consider relationships with younger men as a viable, long-term relationship because age-hypogamous intimate relationships are (allegedly) bound to fail (Kaklamanidou, 2012; Tally, 2006).

Such inconsistent interpretations of women who choose younger men as intimate partners can also be found online, when one searches for definitions of the term ‘cougar’. For instance, according to Urban Dictionary, a ‘cougar’ is “anyone from an overly surgically altered wind tunnel victim, to an absolute sad and bloated old horn-meister, to a real hottie or MILF”¹⁰. WikiHow summarizes the contradicting definitions of ‘cougars’ commonly used: “Pop culture paints the cougar as predatory and pathetically desperate, but women have recently begun fighting the stereotype: real cougars, they argue, are confident, successful, single women over the age of 40, who — tired of unromantic and narrow-minded men their own age — date younger, more active and more adventurous men”¹¹.

The cultural fascination with age-hypogamous intimate relationships, I argue, is not only the result of a taboo regarding relationships where there is a considerable age difference between partners. After all, it is quite common for older men to date women who are younger than themselves (Boyd & Li, 2003; Bozon, 1990; Duchesne, 2004; England & McClintock, 2009; U.S. Bureau of the

¹⁰ See <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Cougar>

¹¹ See <https://www.wikihow.com/Know-if-a-Woman-is-a-Cougar>

Census, 2016a), and these relationships most often go unnoticed. In fact, in order to fully understand the cultural fascination with age-hypogamous intimate relationships found in the media, we must take into consideration the ways in which ageism interacts with sexism in creating an environment particularly restrictive for older women looking for intimate partners (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2006; England & McClintock, 2009; Lai & Hynie, 2011; Rostosky & Travis, 2000). I suggest that women who choose younger intimate partners intrigue people because they are perceived as deviating from traditional norms regarding *older women's* sexuality and intimate relationships, and because they challenge many assumptions of older women's value as intimate partners¹².

First, these women are perceived as challenging the widespread assumption that, as they age, women lose value on the dating market, more so than men, a phenomenon called the gendered double standard of aging (Carpenter et al., 2006; England & McClintock, 2009; Lai & Hynie, 2011). Indeed, when it comes to (heterosexual) partner selection, men are generally assumed to value first and foremost youth and beauty in women, whereas women are believed to place much more value on a man's socioeconomic status. These assumptions make up the foundation for some of the most well-known theories used to explain (heterosexual) partner selection, such as evolutionary psychology theory (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Ellis & Walsh, 1997; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992) and social exchange theory (Elder, 1969; Goode, 1966; McClintock, 2014; Rosenfeld, 2005; Taylor & Glenn, 1976). Based on these assumptions, women are encouraged to equate their value as intimate partners with their youth and beauty, and to consider their value as

¹² While I argue that women's (perceived) non-conformity to gender norms regarding dating and sexuality contributes to cultural fascination for age-hypogamous intimate relationships, it is important to note that younger men who date older women also challenge gender norms and traditional assumptions about what men supposedly desire in a female partner; such unconventional choices from men also contribute to the cultural fascination for age-hypogamous intimate relationships.

depreciating with age (Caron, 2005; Del Rosso, 2017; Frith, Shaw, & Cheng, 2005; Hurd Clarke, 2002; Lichtenstein, 2012; Travis, Meginnis, & Bardari, 2000; Wolf, 1991). By engaging in age-hypogamous intimate relationships, women shed doubts on these assumptions.

Second, commonly depicted in the media as actively searching for, approaching, and overtly seducing younger men, women who date younger men are therefore imagined as disregarding the conventional, culture-level¹³ script for (heterosexual) dating behavior and taking on a role that has traditionally been reserved for men. Indeed, when it comes to relationship formation, men are expected to initiate the first contact and make key gestures intended to propel the relationship beyond the first interaction (i.e. asking the woman out on a first date, initiating the first kiss and/or sexual advances) (England, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2008; Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Morr Serewicz & Gale, 2008; Rose & Frieze, 1989). Women, on the other hand, are encouraged to passively wait to be chosen by men and are constrained to reactive behavior, that is to say accepting/refusing men's romantic gestures or sexual advances (Eaton & Rose, 2011; England et al., 2008; Kurth, Spiller, & Travis, 2000; Lamont, 2014; Laner & Ventrone, 1998; Paynter & Leaper, 2016).

Third, because women who engage in age-hypogamous intimate relationships are commonly depicted as highly desiring, sexually assertive women, they are perceived as challenging major prescriptions found in the hegemonic, culture-level script for (heterosexual) sex. Supported by the widespread, longstanding assumptions that men have stronger sex drives than women and that — unlike women — men have 'uncontrollable' sexual impulses (Donat & White, 2000; Morokoff, 2000), the hegemonic sexual script found at the culture-level encourages men to think of

¹³ According to Gagnon and Simon (1973) there are three types of scripts: (1) the cultural scripts, (2) the interpersonal scripts, and (3) the intrapsychic scripts. Culture-level scripts are the guidelines for sexual conduct that are found within cultural narratives, such as within the media, religious discourses, school education, etc.

themselves as sexual subjects entitled to feel sexual desires, express them, and prioritize their own sexual pleasure during (heterosexual) sex. On the other hand, women are prescribed the role of sexual objects, meaning that they are encouraged to view themselves as the passive recipients of men's sexual desire and to show limited levels of sexual assertiveness (Fahs, 2011; Kurth et al., 2000; Lang, Lebel, Lebel, Beaulieu, & Rousseau, 2011; Morokoff, 2000; Smolak, Murnen, & Myers, 2014; Travis et al., 2000).

The hegemonic, culture-level script for (heterosexual) sex also dictates that presenting oneself as desiring and desirable is more acceptable for the young, physically 'attractive', childless woman (Friedman, Weinberg, & Pines, 1998; Montemurro & Siefken, 2012). While there are increasing cultural representations of older women's sexuality in the media — such as in mainstream movies (Tally, 2006; Weitz, 2010), television shows (Andrews, 2003; Lavigne et al., 2013) as well as in pornography (Huntley, 2000; Musial, 2014; Vannier et al., 2014) — older women are still often presented as asexual in the media (Baumann & de Laat, 2012; Gannon, 1999) or their sexual desires are presented in a humorous way (Kaklamanidou, 2012; Weitz, 2010). Studies also show that people tend to assume that older women are less interested in sex than young women (Lai & Hynie, 2011), and that they commonly expect women to avoid dressing up in a way that would be too 'sexy' and/or presenting themselves as too sexually active once they become mothers (Friedman et al., 1998; Montemurro & Siefken, 2012).

Finally, because they are commonly depicted as engaging in short-term, casual intimate relationships, and as bouncing from one 'boy toy' to the next, women who date younger men are perceived as challenging the "ideology of marriage and family" (DePaulo & Morris, 2005) which presents being in a long-term, committed intimate relationship as the ultimate goal a woman should strive for in order to truly be fulfilled in life (Byrne, 2005; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). The pressure

to find a life companion (and start a family) is particularly strong for women since the traditional notion of femininity is strongly associated with women's roles as wives and mothers (Andrews, 2003; Simpson, 2016). And while singlehood is considered an acceptable state for teenagers and young adults (Morris, DePaulo, Hertel, & Taylor, 2008; Tanner & Arnett, 2011), research shows that when they reach their late twenties or thirties, single women feel particularly pressured to find a long-term intimate relationship and that many report feeling stigmatized for their unpartnered status (Lichtenstein, 2012; Morris et al., 2008; Sharp & Ganong, 2011; Simpson, 2016).

Overall, the cultural representations of 'cougars' often depict older women who date younger men as deviating from many of the gender norms regarding sexuality and intimate relationships, and as challenging common assumptions about women's (and men's) value on the dating market. However, it is unclear to what extent these images correspond to the reality of real women who date younger men. In fact, while we know about the prevalence of age-hypogamous marital/common law unions and about the sociodemographic profile of women who tend to choose younger male partners, we know very little about women's experiences with age-hypogamous intimate relationships. How do women meet younger male partners? Why do some women choose younger men as intimate partners? Do younger men and older women challenge/adhere to the gender norms prescribed in the traditional dating and sexual scripts usually found in similar-age or age-hypergamous intimate relationships, and if they do, to what extent? How do women navigate the sexist and ageist assumptions about women's value as intimate partners, and how does that affect their relationships with younger men? Finally, how does the age difference influence the way they see the future of their relationships?

The study

With this research, I sought to answer the following overarching question: How do women experience age-hypogamous intimate relationships in the heterosexual dating context? In order to answer my research question, in 2015, I conducted 59 semi-structured interviews with Montreal women aged 30-60 who date younger men. In order to explore whether women of different ages would have different experiences, I opted for a stratified sampling strategy based on women's age, and created three age groups with a similar number of participants. In this dissertation, I explore the following facets of women's experiences:

- a) Women's negotiation of gender norms regarding normative dating and sexual behavior when they are with younger men;
- b) Women's perceptions of (un)desirable traits in men and how that affects their partnering choices;
- c) The way women assess their own value as intimate partners and how that assessment affects their partnering choices;
- d) Women's perception of the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships.

The first chapter of the dissertation is the literature review. I present the main theories used to explain men's and women's preferences in terms of prospective partners and their actual partner selection behavior: evolutionary psychology theory, social exchange theory, feminist theories, and script theory. For each of these theories, I elaborate on what can be assumed about men and women who choose age-hypogamous intimate relationships. Then, I review important empirical evidence on the effect (and interplay) of age and gender on sexual behavior and partner selection,

highlighting the complexity of the partner selection process and the limitations of some of the theories mentioned earlier in the chapter.

In the second chapter, I describe the research design for this study. I explain my decision to focus on women aged 30-60 years old and my decision to use a stratified sampling strategy. I justify my decision to use semi-structured interviews as well as the site chosen for the data collection. I also provide details on how participants were recruited and interviewed. Furthermore, I provide details on the sociodemographic characteristics of my sample. Finally, I elaborate on how the data was analyzed.

In the third chapter, I explore how women talk about the way they met their younger partners and how their age-hypogamous intimate relationships were initially formed, with the intent of shedding light on men's and women's behavior in the non-traditional context of age-hypogamous dating. More precisely, I clarify to what extent women resist/reproduce the traditional, culture-level dating script in the context of age-hypogamous dating. I found that contrary to common cultural representations of 'cougars', very few women depicted themselves as confident seductresses who pursued younger men, with younger men passively waiting to be courted. In fact, most women presented themselves as having played a rather passive role in the relationship formation process; however, this was much more pronounced among those in their 40s and 50s than among 30-something women. Indeed, according to most women over 40, the relationship formation process they experienced with younger partners is one that generally followed the traditional dating script where men play an active role, and women's role is limited to a reactive one. Most participants in their 40s and 50s also suggested that single men their age or older indirectly pushed them towards younger men, as those men were rarely interested in women of similar age and/or were often not desirable options.

In the fourth chapter, I analyze the way women talk about sex with their younger partners and how that compares with sex in similar-age or age-hypergamous intimate relationships. More specifically, I explore women's accounts of the sexual interplay in age-hypogamous intimate relationships with the intent of understanding how choosing younger men relates to women's desire and ability to reproduce/disrupt the long-standing sexual script. I found that participants perceive age-hypogamous intimate relationships as a context where it is easier for women to disrupt some facets of the longstanding culture-level script for (heterosexual) sex. Depicting themselves as sexually empowered women, women describe choosing younger sex partners as a logical decision for women like themselves, because it facilitates their efforts to: (a) present themselves as having a strong sex drive and act on it, (b) be sexually assertive in bed, and/or (c) ensure that their pleasure would be attended to.

Women's perception of the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships is the topic of the fifth chapter. I explore the factors women take into consideration when reflecting on how long they think their intimate relationships with younger men will last. I found that a large portion of women's doubts or insecurities with regards to the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships stems from the traditional conception of women's worth as associated with their physical attractiveness and their reproductive capacities/childrearing aptitudes. These are not, however, the only factors that women consider; many women worry that their younger partners will not be ready to settle down when they are and many participants believe that younger men might not be mature enough to be great life companions. However, I also found that, compared to younger participants, women in their 50s are much less preoccupied with whether or not their age-hypogamous intimate relationships will last, and perceive fewer obstacles to the longevity of their relationships.

In the concluding chapter, I review the main overarching arguments presented in this dissertation. Specifically, I argue that women in age-hypogamous intimate relationships often reproduce rather conventional gendered expectations for female behavior and assumptions about women's value. Indeed, most women, in this study, present themselves as having played a rather passive role in the relationship formation process, reproducing, in large part, the traditional dating script found at the cultural level. Furthermore, when assessing the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships, many of them struggled with resisting the traditional conception of women's worth as ultimately associated with their youthful physical appearance and their reproductive potential/childrearing capacities.

However, I argue that these women also challenge many aspects of the traditional, gender-typed script for (heterosexual) sex. Effectively, they present themselves as sexually empowered women, and they explain their choice of younger partners as motivated in part by their desire to have partners who appreciate highly desiring, sexually assertive women, and who possess the qualities required to allow women to reach maximal pleasure during sex. Furthermore, in the context of age-hypogamous sex, these women successfully neutralize the idea that older women are less valuable than young women as intimate partners, as they perceive many younger men as preferring older, sexually experienced and confident female sex partners. In this sense, focusing on their sexual skills allows women to re-position themselves as highly-desirable partners (although only temporarily, as this value is perceived as context-bound).

Finally, I argue that there are differences in experiences among women along the lines of age. Indeed, women of different ages differ with regard to their attempts/capacity to challenge normative expectations for women's dating and sexual behavior, and to resist traditional assumptions regarding women's worth as intimate partners. I explain these differences by the fact

that younger and older participants differ with regards to: (a) the extent to which they are affected by the societal discourse indicating that women's value decreases with age; (b) the extent to which they fear being criticized for being too sexually desiring; (c) whether they perceive younger men as fetishizing older women like themselves; (d) their dating goals, namely whether they wish to eventually move in with/marry their partner and/or have (more) children; and finally, (e) their perceptions of the desirability of single men in their age-bracket.

The findings from this study contribute to the areas of sociology of gender, sociology of family, as well as sociology of sexuality. First, the findings from this study shed light on women's negotiation of normative expectations regarding dating and sexual behavior. Specifically, this dissertation improves our understanding of the factors influencing women's reproduction/rejection of gender-typed scripts for heterosexual dating and sex, and the ways through which age differences between partners can facilitate/complicate women's desire/capacity to re-negotiate gender-typed scripts.

By taking a look at an understudied intimate relationship form such as age-hypogamous relationships, the findings presented here also contribute to the partner selection body of literature. While there has been much research conducted on more traditional partnering patterns such as similar-age and age-hypergamous intimate relationships, very few scholars have investigated the reasons why some women choose younger men (and some men choose older women), and the factors that women perceive as facilitating/complicating their desire/ability to develop long-lasting relationships with younger men. This dissertation brings important insight into the considerations influencing older women's choice of younger partners, and their decision to develop (or not) long-term intimate relationships with younger men.

Finally, by investigating women's accounts of the intimate relationship formation process in the context of age-hypogamous dating, women's accounts of the sexual dynamic between younger men and themselves, and women's perceptions of the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships, this dissertation elucidates the extent to which the common cultural representations of 'cougars' or age-hypogamous intimate relationships correspond to what real women who date younger men experience.

CHAPTER 1 — GENDER, AGE, AND HETEROSEXUAL PARTNER SELECTION

In this chapter, I review the main theories that are typically used to understand gender differences in partnering choices and sexual behavior — namely evolutionary psychology theory, social exchange theory, feminist theories, and script theory — and discuss what each of them tells us about age hypergamy and age hypogamy in heterosexual intimate relationships. Then, I present important findings of studies on the effect of age and gender on individuals' preferences for intimate partners, and on their actual choice of partners. Based on empirical evidence, I draw attention to some of the limitations of evolutionary psychology theory, and I show how misguided it is to reduce men's and women's partner selection choices to a simple youth-beauty/socioeconomic status exchange equation.

Explaining partner selection: Theoretical tools

One of the most common theories used to explain (heterosexual) partnering patterns is evolutionary psychology (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993, 2011; Ellis & Walsh, 1997; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Singh & Singh, 2011). Drawing from modern evolutionary theory, biology and cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology posits that human behavior is influenced by evolved psychological mechanisms that emerged through time to solve adaptive problems that recurred for humans over thousands of years. These psychological mechanisms are said to have appeared as a way to maximize reproduction and ensure the survival of the species. According to evolutionary psychology theorists, men and women differ with regards to sexual behavior and mating strategies because over human evolutionary history, they have recurrently faced distinct adaptive problems.

The theory posits that because men are not naturally required to invest much energy in their offspring and since they are unconsciously aiming to have as many children as possible, men try to have many different sex partners (Ellis & Walsh, 1997). Men are said to have a preference for younger female partners as a result of an unconscious, imprinted desire to reproduce which leads them to select young and (more likely) fecund women as their sexual partner. Men are thought to read women's youth and beauty as indicators of fertility and good health (Buss, 1989; Singh & Singh, 2011). Therefore, as men age, they are expected to keep looking for women of reproductive age with whom they could reproduce, which results in an increasing age gap between men and their female partner (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Buunk, Dijkstra, Kenrick, & Warntjes, 2001; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992).

On the other hand, evolutionary psychology theorists claim that since women are more physically involved than men in the survival of their offspring — i.e. during pregnancy and lactation — they are unconsciously drawn to partners who can provide food, material possessions and protection, and more inclined towards monogamy than men (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Ellis & Walsh, 1997; Hyde & Oliver, 2000; Regan & Berscheid, 1997). These scholars also assume that women are more careful than men in their selection of sex partners because, unlike their male counterparts, they have a limited number of eggs (Hyde & Oliver, 2000). With regards to women's age preference for partners, evolutionary psychology theorists argue that women look for older men because they are seeking partners who will be able to support and protect them as well as their offspring on a long-term basis (Buss, 1989; Buunk et al., 2001).

In other words, according to evolutionary psychology theory, the difference between men and women with regards to partnering choices and sexual behavior are rooted in biological predispositions that developed in prehistorical times as a way for humans to maximize

reproductive success. Therefore, the sexual double standard allowing men to have many sex partners while discouraging promiscuity for women, as well as the gendered double standard of aging would be the result of evolved unconscious psychological mechanisms intended to ensure the survival of the species.

Such evolutionary views have been criticized by many scholars (Einon, 1997; Hyde & Oliver, 2000; Moore & Brown Travis, 2000; Over & Phillips, 1997), largely for trying to re-inscribe social dynamics into the biological/natural realm based on flawed reasoning, sexist (and heterosexist) assumptions, and shaky evidence. Many scholars, like Moore and Brown Travis (2000), also criticized evolutionary psychology theory for reconstructing versions of prehistoric arrangements that are impossible to confirm. And while evolutionary psychology theorists have dedicated much theoretical space to the analysis of age hypergamy in heterosexual intimate relationships, they have been rather silent on age hypogamy. It is unclear, using evolutionary psychology theory, why some women choose younger male partners, and why some men choose older female partners.

Social exchange theory (Elder, 1969; Goode, 1966; McClintock, 2014; Rosenfeld, 2005; Taylor & Glenn, 1976) — or the very similar choice theory as described by Laumann et al. (1994) — is also commonly used to explain the partnering process. Here, partnering is understood as the result of a rational choice based on a logical calculation. According to this theory, each person comes to the dating market with a series of individual characteristics that are then evaluated by potential partners as valuable or not. It is argued that everyone tries to find a partner that has the most desired qualities, and that mating occurs when both partners are satisfied with what the other has to offer (Lawton & Callister, 2010; Regan, 2008; South, 1991). Rationally, if every individual seeks the best value in a partner, individuals of approximately equal value will tend to couple up. In this sense, the theory predicts that individuals with less desirable characteristics have to lower their

expectations if they want to find a spouse; therefore, someone with less desirable traits is expected to couple up with another person who does not have highly valued personal characteristics or to remain single (Regan, 2008; South, 1991).

When trying to make sense of the tendency for women to couple with older men, many social exchange theorists argued that men desire beauty and youth as the most important qualities in women, while women tend to look for men with status and financial resources (Elder, 1969; Goode, 1966; Rosenfeld, 2005; Schoen & Wooldredge, 1989; South, 1991; Taylor & Glenn, 1976). Applied to age hypergamy, social exchange theorists contend that young women choose older men because they want financial stability or wish to improve their current socioeconomic situation, and that men are looking for younger women for their childbearing capacities and/or because they are believed to be more physically attractive.

Following the social exchange theory logic, one could assume that some younger men turn to older women because they do not have the financial resources or status needed to attract women their age. One could also assume that older women involved in age-hypogamous intimate relationships choose younger men as a last resort, because all the other men their age or older prefer younger women. Such reasoning is not uncommon; for instance, when they found that, unlike young women, a large portion of women over 40 reported having younger male sex partners, Laumann et al. (1994, p. 253) stated: “If we assume that women desire sex partners somewhat older than themselves, then the failure of women over forty in general to locate such partners may reflect the disadvantaged position of these women in the sexual marketplace”.

Applying social exchange theory to age hypogamous relationships, other scholars suggest that older women might in fact possess many traits that could outweigh the fact that they no longer

have a youthful physical appearance or reproductive capacities to exchange. For instance, Lawton and Callister (2010) suggested that for younger men not interested in forming a family and/or looking for casual intimate relationships, older women might appear as a better value than young women since older women likely have more sexual experience, have higher incomes, and do not wish to have (more) children. Older women, they also argue, might perceive younger men as having more sexual stamina than men their age, as being more open to new experiences, and as being physically more attractive. The researchers argue that younger men might therefore appear to some women in their 40s and 50s as a better ‘deal’ than older men, at least for short-term intimate relationships.

Feminist scholarship also provides a wealth of theoretical and conceptual tools allowing us to understand sexuality and intimate relationships. Contrary to evolutionary psychology theory, feminist theorists point to socioeconomic and cultural factors as the main causes of gender differences in partnering patterns and sexual behavior (Hyde & Oliver, 2000). In fact, feminist scholars see sexuality and intimate relationships as understood and experienced by individuals based on the historical, cultural and material context in which they are located (Travis et al., 2000).

To begin, feminist scholars understand gender as a social construct. Many understand gender as something people constantly (and most often unconsciously) do, which ultimately allows them to reaffirm their masculinity/femininity (Butler, 1990; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Others, like Risman (2004) combine this interactional approach to gender with a structural perspective. Inspired by Giddens (1984)’ structuration theory, she understands “structure” as external forces influencing individuals’ beliefs and behavior, but she also considers individuals as contributing to the reproduction/modification of the structure through their actions. According to Risman, the gender structure provides individuals with different opportunities and

constraints based on the sex category they belong to. She argues that the gender structure has consequences for women and men on three dimensions: 1) At the individual level, for the development of gendered selves; (2) during interaction, as men and women face different cultural expectations; (3) at the institutional level, as explicit rules and practices regarding the distribution of and access to resources are gender-specific. She asserts that the mechanisms creating gender (in)equality can be found in each of these three dimensions.

Feminist scholars also dedicate a lot of theoretical space to the analysis of gender power dynamics. They reflect on the root of power imbalance between women and men, and on the consequences of gender inequalities on individuals. They explore, among other things, how sexuality and relationships are affected by these power differentials. For instance, they reflect on how gender power dynamics influence women's and men's ability/desire to impose their sexual desire onto others, or to resist unwanted sexual gestures (see Brownmiller, 1975; Donat & White, 2000; Kurth et al., 2000). Other feminist scholars address how the cultural devaluation of aging in women serves patriarchal objectives, and how such ageist conceptions of women's worth can affect women's identities, confidence, relationships, and sexuality (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013; Montemurro & Siefken, 2012; Travis et al., 2000; Wolf, 1991).

In fact, most feminists consider beauty or physical attractiveness as social constructs; in other words, what is beautiful in women is neither spatially nor temporally bound (Travis et al., 2000; Wolf, 1991). Many explain the cultural emphasis on youth and physical appearance for women as a social mechanism intended to maintain women in a subordinate position (see Travis et al., 2000; Wolf, 1991). According to Wolf (1991), the cultural association between a woman's worth, beauty, and youth is a strategy to prevent older and therefore, more experienced women from challenging patriarchal beliefs and practices; older women can easily be ridiculed based on their physical

appearance which consequently discredits their claims. The “beauty myth” also encourages competition among women, therefore preventing any collective effort to challenge the status quo.

Furthermore, many feminist scholars (Rich, 1980; Wittig, 1980, 1992) think of sexual preferences and behavior as resulting from the strong pressure for individuals to find an opposite-sex partner — that is, individuals are strongly regulated by heterosexuality as a social institution. When trying to explain partnering patterns, one could borrow from Rich (1980)’s concepts of “compulsory heterosexuality” and “ideology of heterosexual romance” — that is, the hegemonic societal discourse encouraging young girls to believe in the naturalness of heterosexuality and to accept their destiny as subordinates to men — and question the assumption that women are naturally attracted to men in the first place. Wittig (1992) argues that marriage is, in fact, a tool for men to appropriate women’s productive and reproductive work as well as their physical person. In other words, the fundamental premises on which much of the literature on partner selection relies — namely, that women and men are naturally or instinctively attracted to one another, and that forming a long-lasting relationship is a natural female instinct — has been questioned by several feminists.

Using a feminist approach, the common practice of age hypergamy in heterosexual relationships can be theorized as more than just the result of a sexual preference; it can also be seen as an attempt by men to reaffirm their masculinity, as men arguably gain social capital from being in relationships with young, beautiful women (i.e. ‘trophy wives’). One could also argue that women are not naturally drawn to older men, but that there are many social control mechanisms in place discouraging women from choosing younger men as intimate partners. For instance, while women are taught from a young age not to place much value in their partner’s physical appearance (e.g. through children stories such as *The Beauty and The Beast*), they are strongly encouraged to equate

their own value as intimate partners with their own beauty, which is culturally depicted as declining as they age. Furthermore, there is a cultural taboo against age-hypogamous intimate relationships. These factors might discourage women who are attracted to younger men to act on their sexual desire or romantic feelings.

Using a feminist approach to explain age-hypogamy in heterosexual relationships, one could suggest that considering the strong cultural pressure on women to think of their self-worth as determined by their youth, beauty, and overall ability to physically attract men, some women dating younger men might do so, in part, to show others and/or prove to themselves that they are not only still capable of attracting men, but that they can even attract those “out of their league”. Attracting younger men might be perceived by these women as the ultimate proof that they still embody what they believe to be the most valued aspect of femininity.

Alternatively, one could also assume that for some women, choosing younger male partners is motivated in part by a desire to challenge sexist norms and beliefs by asking for the same kind of sexual freedom that men have benefited from for centuries. In other words, age hypogamy might be for some women a political statement intended to destabilize patriarchy. Using feminist lenses, age-hypogamous intimate relationships could be read as the ultimate symbol of women’s sexual empowerment.

Finally, many feminist scholars argue that women’s sexuality is strongly affected by economic inequalities between men and women (Hyde & Oliver, 2000; Mundy, 2012). In this sense, one could also argue that women’s increasing economic independence over the last decades (Belleau, 2011; Coontz, 2015; Mundy, 2012; Tichenor, 2005; Vanier Institute of the Family, 2010; S. J. Wilson, 2001) might have allowed them to modify the type of criteria they use to assess the

desirability of prospective partners and freed them from the traditional imperative for women to find a husband who will ensure their financial well-being. One should note that this argument is also congruous with social exchange theory. However, social exchange theorists rarely question *why* most women have fewer economic resources than men, or venture into investigating *why* men place so much value on women's beauty.

Lastly, Gagnon and Simon's script theory (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1986) is also often used to explain men's and women's behavior with regards to sexuality and intimate relationships. Initially developed to explain sexual behavior, script theory posits that sexuality is not biologically determined but rather something that individuals have to learn, and that gets internalized over time, giving it the illusion of naturalness. Scripts provides important information to individuals regarding sexuality, informing them on important questions such as what should be read as sexual, what should trigger sexual desire, with whom it is appropriate to have sex, when and where they should have sex, what kind of sexual practice is acceptable, why they should engage in sexual behavior, etc. Since the publication of Gagnon and Simon's work more than four decades ago, script theory has been applied to more than mere sexual behavior (Gagnon, 1991; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). For instance, it has also been used to understand men's and women's expectations and behavior in the dating context, such as in the first moments of intimate relationship formation (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994; Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Morr Serewicz & Gale, 2008; Rose & Frieze, 1989).

Script theory posits that there are three types of scripts which are all interrelated: (1) the cultural scripts, which are the guidelines for sexual conduct that are embedded in the cultural narratives; (2) the interpersonal scripts, which are the structured patterns of interaction in which individuals engage in their everyday interpersonal encounters; (3) the intrapsychic scripts, which are the ideas

and fantasies by which individuals reflect on their past, current, and future conduct (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Scripts should not be interpreted as rigid scenarios, but rather as guidelines allowing individuals to know what to expect and to do in a specific context while leaving room for improvisation. Gagnon (1991, p. 5) summarizes the five major underpinnings of script theory:

a) sexual conduct is entirely historically and culturally determined; b) the meaning of sexual conduct does reside in a reading of the bodily activity of individuals; c) sexual science is historically and culturally determined; d) sexuality is acquired, maintained, and unlearned in all of its aspects and is organized by social structure and culture, and; e) gender and sexuality are both learned forms of conduct and linked differently in different cultures.

Script theory and social exchange theory are compatible. Laumann and his colleagues (1994) argue that used together, the two theories can improve our understanding of how people reflexively engage in sexuality. Indeed, they contend that while script theory is helpful in explaining how individuals come to think of and do sexuality in a certain way, social exchange theory can tell us how the individuals choose among the variety of scripts available to them. According to these scholars, combining these two theories can therefore explain some of the changes in various scripts over time.

Script theory is also compatible with feminist theories, as both perspectives understand sexuality as influenced by historical and cultural factors. Both theories explain the sexual double standards permitting much more freedom to men than women with regards to the context in which they can have sex, the number of sex partners they can have, and the type of sexual practices they can engage in as a result of the gendered process of socialization which teaches boy and girls very different messages with regards to what constitute acceptable sexual behavior (Hyde & Oliver, 2000). Indeed, script theorists contend that women and men learn separate, but overlapping (and

often complementary) scripts (Wiederman, 2005) which influence men and women to behave differently when it comes to sexuality and relationships.

Applying the logic of script theory to the common pattern of age hypergamy within heterosexual relationships, it could be argued that men and women learn different scripts with regards to what characteristics they should consider desirable and attractive in an opposite sex partner. Furthermore, because sexual scripts are understood by script theorists as rough guidelines that can be modified by the individuals, it does allow for a consideration of cultural changes with regard to the way individuals do sexuality and intimate relationships. For instance, recent changes regarding gender ideologies (Anderson, 2009; Gerson, 2010), shifts in norms and attitudes regarding sexuality (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Allyn, 2000; Altemeyer, 2001; Corriveau, 2008; Kamen, 2000; Lévy, 2008a), as well as the recent media interests in ‘cougars’ (Aoun, 2013; Lawton & Callister, 2010) might have contributed to the modification of traditional sexual and dating scripts, influencing some women to opt for younger male partners.

Overall, although they rely on different assumptions to explain why most men couple off with younger women, each of these four theories provides a plausible explanation for the common partnering pattern of age hypergamy. However, unlike the other theories presented here, evolutionary psychology theory falls short in explaining age hypogamy in heterosexual relationships. In the next section, I review important empirical evidence on the effects of gender and age on sexual behavior and partner selection.

The complexity of partner selection: Empirical evidence

Studies on individuals’ age preference for prospective opposite-sex partners show that on average, men tend to prefer younger female partners, whereas women tend to prefer male partners their age

or slightly older (Burrows, 2013; Buunk et al., 2001; Conway, Noë, Stulp, & Pollet, 2015; Einon, 1997; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Pixley, Feliciano, & Robnett, 2007; Skopek, Schmitz, & Blossfeld, 2011; South, 1991). Furthermore, men's preference for female partners who are younger than them tends to amplify as they get older. Indeed, studies show that as they age, men tend to look for women who are increasingly younger than them (Buunk et al., 2001; Pixley et al., 2007; South, 1991). This means that the age of men's ideal female partner does not increase as quickly as men's own age, leading to an increasing age gap between men and their ideal intimate partner.

Older men's tendency to prefer female partners who are significantly younger than them influences their actual partner selection behavior. Middle-aged and elderly men's tendency to search for younger female partners is particularly flagrant on dating websites and applications, as a large portion of them set their age preference settings so they will be presented mostly with profiles of much younger women (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Conway et al., 2015; Pixley et al., 2007; Skopek et al., 2011). For instance, Pixley et al. (2007) found that on average, 41-50 year old men indicated on their online dating profile that they were looking for a female partner who would be between 13.8 years younger than them to 1.2 year older than them. Using the midpoint in men's reported minimum and maximum age preference for female partners indicated on their online dating profile, Alterovitz and Mendelsohn (2009) found that on average, men aged 40-54 searched for women who were roughly five years younger than them.

Older men are much more likely than women of the same age to show interest for younger intimate partners (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Buunk et al., 2001; Conway et al., 2015; Jagger, 2005; Montenegro, 2003). For instance, looking at U.S. men and women aged 40-69 years old, Montenegro (2003) found that 17 percent of women indicated that the ideal partner would be at least 5 years younger, compared to 64 percent of men who reported the same preference for their

ideal female partner. As for Jagger (2005)'s analysis of dating personal ads, it revealed that 47 percent of men aged 35-44 years old compared to 8 percent of women in the same age group advertised for partners who were in their 20s or early 30s.

Older men's tendency to seek younger women combined with older women's tendency to seek a similar-age partner creates a dating environment that can be quite difficult to navigate for single older women looking for an intimate partner. In Canada as well as in the U.S., starting when people reach their 40s, the ratio of single women versus single men begins to increase (Statistics Canada, 2017a; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2016b), meaning that there are more single women than single men and that this gap increases as individuals age. Investigating this phenomenon, England and McClintock (2009) found that sex differences in mortality only explained a small portion of the changes in the sex ratio among singles, and that age hypergamy as a common practice in heterosexual relationships was a more important explanatory factor. In fact, England and McClintock (2009) found that the age gap between husband and wife was of one year when men marry in their 20s, but that the age gap was of nine to 12 years if they are marrying in their 60s (depending on the man's self-reported race).

The effect of a man's age on his age preference for female partners has been well documented. While it seems to support evolutionary psychology's premise that men are unconsciously driven towards women with whom they could procreate, as well as social exchange theory's prediction that women and men engage in a youth-beauty/socioeconomic status exchange, there is a lot of empirical evidence about men's and women's sexual preferences and behavior that is commonly ignored and that shows a much more complex portrait of heterosexual partner selection.

First, there is ample evidence suggesting that evolutionary psychology theory is problematic in its assumption that human sexual behavior is influenced by evolved psychological mechanisms intended to maximize reproduction. For instance, several researchers point out that many men who couple off in their 50s or older choose female partners who are younger, but no longer fertile (Einon, 1997; England & McClintock, 2009). Studies on sexual assault also highlight that some female victims are postmenopausal (Jones, Rossman, Diegel, Van Order, & Wynn, 2009; Malmedal, Iversen, & Kilvik, 2015), which sheds additional doubt on the assumption that men's sexual behavior and choice of partners is driven by an unconscious desire to reproduce.

Furthermore, if the human brain has been wired in a way that would trigger sexual arousal in situations that present reproductive potential, then it is unclear why postmenopausal women would continue to experience sexual desire and engage in sex. Nonetheless, studies show that a considerable portion of women in their 50s or older experience sexual desires (Das, Waite, & Laumann, 2012; J. D. DeLamater & Sill, 2005), masturbate (Das et al., 2012; Montenegro, 2003), and engage in partnered sex (Das et al., 2012; J. DeLamater & Moorman, 2007; Fraser, Maticka-Tyndale, & Smylie, 2004; Montenegro, 2003). For instance, based on an analysis of the 1996-97 Canadian National Health Population Survey, Fraser et al. (2004) found that around 81 percent of Canadian women aged 55-59 years old had engaged in sexual activity with a partner in the last 12 months. In fact, if one is to support the evolutionary assertion that reproduction is the main unconscious goal triggering sex drive, it is unclear how one could explain not only why many men couple with women who are no longer fertile and why postmenopausal women continue to show interest in sex, but also why anyone would engage in masturbation, oral sex, homosexual practices, pedophilia or any other sexual behavior that has no reproductive potential.

With regards to empirical evidence in support of the youth-beauty/socioeconomic status exchange that many social exchange theorists believe to be central to the heterosexual partnering process, one must first acknowledge that there are indeed some studies that show that men focus more on physical appearance and youth than women (Buss & Barnes, 1986; South, 1991), and that women focus more on socioeconomic status than men (Townsend & Levy, 1990). However, there are also many indications that the youth-beauty/socioeconomic status exchange men and women are commonly believed to do when searching for a partner is an oversimplified and somewhat distorted portrait of the partner selection process (McClintock, 2014; Regan & Berscheid, 1997; South, 1991; Taylor & Glenn, 1976).

For instance, asking men and women to rate various characteristics in a fictitious marriage partner, South (1991) found that while men did place more importance on physical appearance than women, they tended to place more value on a woman having steady employment than on her physical attractiveness. As for Regan and Berscheid (1997), they found that, when asked to rank in order of importance 23 partner characteristics, women did not differ from men when it came to rating the importance of “social or financial power” or “having a college degree” in a prospective marriage partner. In fact, the top five traits women considered the most important in a marriage partner were: 1) “honest or trustworthy”, 2) “sensitive (companionate, kind, able to share feelings)”, 3) “overall personality”, 4) “intelligent”, and 5) “attentive to partner’s needs”. Being a “college graduate”, or being “socially or financially powerful” were ranked much lower on women’s list, after “sense of humour”, and “wants children”. These studies suggest that women place less importance on a man’s socioeconomic status than was is commonly assumed, and that men also tend place a lot of importance on their intimate partners’ socioeconomic status.

Social exchange theorists commonly explain women's choice of older intimate partners as motivated by the desire to be financially secure. According to this line of thought, we should anticipate that a larger proportion of women who have younger intimate partners would be women with considerable financial resources, as being financially independent would free them from the need to find a partner who is older and more established financially. However, South (1991) found that when women were asked about desired qualities of a hypothetical partner, a woman's income played no significant role in her willingness to marry a younger man (or an older one).

Furthermore, some studies indicate that men who score lower on socioeconomic measures such as education are actually more likely than highly educated men to marry much younger women (Atkinson & Glass, 1985). Others, like England and McClintock (2009) found the effect of men's education on age hypergamy is rather small; they found that among men over 40 years old, those with a college degree 'marry down' only less than two more years compared to men who never completed their high school education. Finally, Jacobs and Furstenberg (1986) found that in second marriages, a woman's age has no effect on whether she marries a man with a high-status occupation.

Others, like McClintock (2014), criticized the studies assessing whether there is indeed a beauty/socioeconomic status exchange at play between heterosexual partners because most often, the researchers did not control for inter-couple matching on those traits. Indeed, she argued that economically successful women tend to partner with economically successful men, and that physically attractive women tend to couple with physically attractive men. She found that after controlling for matching between intimate partners on traits such as physical attractiveness and socioeconomic status, nearly all evidence of a beauty-status exchange among heterosexual couples disappeared. In other words, 'beautiful' women who married wealthy men also considered their

partners' physical attractiveness when choosing them, and most often opted for a 'physically attractive' spouse.

Many researchers found that individuals' preferences for partner characteristics also vary depending on whether they are looking for a casual sexual relationship or a marriage partner (Buunk et al., 2001; Regan & Berscheid, 1997; Urbaniak & Kilmann, 2003). Regan and Berscheid (1997) found that while male participants placed more importance on physical appearance than women when asked to think of an ideal marriage partner, both men and women indicated that physical appearance was the most important characteristic they considered when evaluating the desirability of a potential casual sex partner. Similarly, Urbaniak and Kilmann (2003)'s found that women placed more value on a man's physical attractiveness when they were looking for casual sex than when they were considering serious intimate relationships.

Buunk et al. (2001) also found that men had different age preferences depending on the type of relationship they wanted with a woman. Among older men, the less committed the relationship was, the younger the ideal female partner was. However, men in their 20s reported being more inclined to seek much older female partners if they were considering casual sex than if they were thinking of a prospective marriage partner. In fact, Buunk and his colleagues found that when men in their 20s were asked to describe the maximum age they would want a female casual sex partner to be, they reported on average being interested in women more than 10 years their senior.

Other studies show that aging influences the qualities women want in an ideal partner, calling into question the assumed stability over the life course of a beauty/socioeconomic status exchange among heterosexual partners (Jagger, 2005; Levesque & Caron, 2004). For instance, Levesque and Caron (2004) found that when presented with an open-ended question regarding the characteristics

they look for in a man, very few of their 35-50 years old female participants mentioned income (10% of women) or education (2%) as important criteria. Instead, they reported looking for these traits in men: “sense of humor” (45%), “respectful of her independence” (43%), “honesty” (40%), “respect for oneself and others” (31%), and “no smokers, heavy drinkers, or drug users” (21%). This suggests that when it comes to evaluating the desirability of prospective partners, younger and older women might use different criteria.

There is also empirical evidence that a woman’s age influences her age preferences for intimate partners. While some studies show that on average, women tend to prefer men their age or slightly older regardless of their own age (Buunk et al., 2001; Conway et al., 2015), other researchers found that as they age, women become increasingly open to the idea of partnering with a younger man (Levesque & Caron, 2004; Montenegro, 2003; Pixley et al., 2007; South, 1991). For instance, South (1991) found that older women were statistically more likely than younger women to report being open to the idea of marrying a younger man in the future. Examining 6,070 individual profiles from an internet dating site, Pixley et al. (2007) found that as they age, women become increasingly open to younger male partners. Finally, Levesque and Caron (2004) noticed that while the common assumption that women prefer older partners was true for the majority of their female participants in their early 20s, less than two out of five middle-aged (35-50 years old) women reported such a preference.

Before arguing in favour of discarding social exchange theory altogether, one should consider that the terms of the exchange might have simply shifted over the course of the last century, and that men’s and women’s perceptions of desirable traits might have merely moved on from that traditional youth-beauty/socioeconomic status exchange model. Some of the results presented above might indeed reflect the recent changes in gender ideologies (Anderson, 2009; Gerson,

2010; Luxton, 2001). These results could also be explained by recent economic changes, such as the fact that a man's individual income is no longer enough to support his whole family in the majority of North American families today (Luxton, 2001; S. J. Wilson, 2001), and/or the fact that women are more financially independent than women from previous generations (Belleau, 2011; Coontz, 2015; Mundy, 2012; Tichenor, 2005; Vanier Institute of the Family, 2010; S. J. Wilson, 2001). In light of these changes, it is possible that men and women adapted their selection criteria in order to find a partner that would best fit their needs and/or that would correspond to changing normative expectations regarding what a desirable male/female partner is.

In conclusion, the partner selection process is complex and cannot be reduced to a simple equation. The studies mentioned above highlight the fact that both men and women modify their selection criteria depending on the type of intimate relationships they are looking for, that gender differences with regards to the importance one places on certain criteria can be reduced/amplified depending on the context (i.e. search for a casual sex partner vs. search for a marriage partner), and that men's and women's selection criteria tend to change over the life course. There is also strong empirical evidence against the evolutionary psychology assumption that the potential for procreation unconsciously influences human sexual behavior and partnering choices.

There are still many unanswered questions regarding age-hypogamous intimate relationships' formation and development. Although many scholars have provided theoretical arguments explaining why most individuals opt for age-hypergamous intimate relationships, it remains unclear why some women choose younger male partners (and why some younger men choose older female partners). Furthermore, it is unclear what influences women's (and men's) decision to develop (or not) age-hypogamous intimate relationships beyond the first intimate encounters. There is also very limited empirical data on the dynamic between older women and younger men,

and on the extent to which they reproduce/resist gendered prescriptions regarding appropriate behavior found in the traditional cultural scripts for heterosexual dating and sex. In the next chapter, I present the research question that drove this doctoral research and provide details on the research design used to shed light on women's experiences with age-hypogamous intimate relationships.

CHAPTER 2 — METHODS

To this day, there have been very few studies on intimate relationships where the woman is older than her male partner. Of the studies interested in age differences between heterosexual partners, most rely on quantitative methods. Those studies allow us to get an idea of the prevalence of age-hypogamous intimate relationships, to identify the socio-demographic factors influencing the likelihood for an individual to partner with a much younger or much older person, and to shed light on gendered patterns among men's and women's preferences in terms of intimate partner attributes. However, those studies do not provide us with information on what men and women are seeking and experiencing when involved in age-hypogamous intimate relationships. They do not explain the process of age-hypogamous intimate relationship formation nor the ways in which the age difference can influence individuals to pursue (or not) to their age-hypogamous intimate relationships.

Furthermore, the vast majority of the literature on age heterogamy (whether age hypergamy or age hypogamy) has been dedicated to married/common-law couples; very few studies have addressed less formalized forms of intimate relationships. There are also relatively few studies focussing specifically on middle-aged women's sexuality besides sexual health studies (Gannon, 1999; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014; Rostosky & Travis, 2000; Sassler, 2010), or study of women's experiences with dating at midlife (Lichtenstein, 2012). Finally, most scholars interested in age-discrepant relationships focused on age-hypergamous intimate relationships, and/or provided detailed theoretical arguments explaining *men's* preference for younger partners, while barely attempting to explain why some women could be interested in younger men (see Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Elder, 1969; Ellis & Walsh, 1997; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992).

Research question

The overarching research question guiding this study is: **How do women experience age-hypogamous intimate relationships in the heterosexual dating context?** More specifically, I explore the following facets of women's experiences: a) women's negotiation of gender norms regarding normative dating and sexual behavior when they are with younger men; b) women's perceptions of (un)desirable traits in men and how that affects their partnering choices; c) the way women assess their own value as intimate partners and how that assessment affects their partnering choices; d) women's perception of the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships.

Considering the dearth of literature on age-hypogamous intimate relationships, there are arguably many other facets of women's experiences that I could have explored. However, I chose to focus on these issues first, because they lay the foundations for a better understanding of why women choose younger men and what influences them to develop their relationships beyond the first intimate encounter. Second, these sub-topics allowed me to investigate how age hypogamy facilitates women's ability/desire to resist traditional gender norms regarding women's sexuality and relationships and to assess to what extent these women correspond to cultural representations of 'cougars' commonly found in the media.

In other words, I was interested in exploring why middle-aged women come to date younger men. I wanted to understand to what extent a man's age was a salient characteristic that attracted (or not) women, and how it affected a woman's decision to give him a chance beyond the first interaction. I also wanted to explore what women thought younger men were looking for when partnering with older women. More specifically, I was interested in knowing how women

explained younger men's attraction for them, and how they perceived younger men's expectations with regards to the relationship.

Furthermore, I wanted to investigate to what extent women reproduced/challenged the traditional gendered prescriptions regarding acceptable behavior found in the traditional cultural scripts for heterosexual dating and sex. Specifically, I wished to clarify whether women saw differences with regards to the way they (and men) behave in the context of age-hypogamous intimate relationships compared to when they date men their age or older, and how they explained those differences (if applicable). Finally, I aimed to learn what women expected out of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships, and to what extent their partners' age influenced their decisions to pursue their relationships.

The motivations behind these foci was twofold. First, I wished to clarify to what extent the common cultural representations of 'cougars' as highly desiring, sexually assertive women who actively search and pursue younger men for temporary flings reflected real women's experiences of dating younger men. Considering the lack of research on women's experiences of age-hypogamous intimate relationships and the negative connotation that is commonly attached to cultural representations of 'cougars', my work was guided by a desire to provide women who date younger men the opportunity to tell their own stories, instead of letting others paint an image of them that does not necessarily reflect their reality. Second, I hoped to contribute to improving our understanding of the partner selection process. I wished to gather data on women's assessment of desirable traits in men as well as on women's assessment of their own desirability as a way to inform existing literature on partner selection which has yet to develop a comprehensive, evidence-based argument explaining why some women (and some men) choose age-hypogamous intimate relationships.

Considering my focus on personal experiences, I chose to rely on qualitative research methods. Indeed, qualitative methods are particularly suited for investigating the ways individuals make sense of their experiences and the meaning they give to a specific social phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 1999). In order to explore middle-aged women's experiences of age hypogamy in heterosexual relationships, my project was carried out through semi-structured interviews with women dating younger men.

Sampling strategy

In this study, I focused on single, middle-aged Canadian women who are dating younger men. I used the term 'single woman' to describe any woman who was not currently cohabiting with or married to her partner at the time of her interview. Women who had previously experienced marriage or common-law unions, and that were now divorced, separated, or widowed were also categorized as 'single'. I chose to restrict my sample to 'single' women, first because I was interested in understanding the reasons why women would decide to pursue (or not) their relationships with younger men beyond the first encounters and to understand how they saw their relationships evolving in the future. For instance, I was interested in knowing whether or not these women could envision moving in with their younger partner or marrying them one day, and why. In order to answer these questions, I needed to focus on women who had not moved in or married their younger partners yet.

Second, I chose to focus on 'single' women's experiences because marriage and cohabitation bring more visibility to a relationship, which in turn could influence a woman's experience of stigma (Laumann et al., 1994). Indeed, marriage and/or common-law status could influence friends and family's acceptance. For instance, they might be more comfortable with age-hypogamous intimate relationships if they remained 'temporary flings', that is, if they interpreted women's untraditional

dating choices as ‘just a phase’. Or, on the contrary, marriage/common-law status could bring legitimacy to age-hypogamous intimate relationships; people could be more supportive if age-hypogamous intimate relationships were perceived to be motivated by ‘true love’ and commitment. Cohabitation and marriage are usually perceived as relationship capstones. However, it would be misguided to imagine that when developing intimate relationships, individuals follow a simple linear path towards cohabitation/marriage and that one can easily identify stages leading to it. In fact, as pointed out by Sassler (2010), research on intimate relationship formation has become particularly complex over the last decades as people desiring sexual and/or emotional intimacy can, more easily than ever, choose from a large variety of relationships forms (e.g.: sexless dating, one-night stands, casual sexual relationships, polyamorous relationships¹⁴, “living apart together”¹⁵, etc.). Furthermore, not everyone reaches the same milestones (e.g. having sex, cohabitation, marriage, childbearing, etc.) with a partner in the same order (if they ever do reach them) (Sassler, 2010). In fact, not everyone sees marriage as the ultimate goal individuals should aim toward, especially in the case of Quebec where common-law unions are much more common than in the rest of Canada¹⁶ (Belleau & INRS-Urbanisation culture et société, 2008; Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2017b). In an effort to respect the diversity of experiences with regards to relationship formation and development, I chose to restrain from categorizing earlier stages of relationships development during participant recruitment and

¹⁴ For more information on polyamorous relationships, see (M. Barker, 2005; Meg Barker & Langdridge, 2010a, 2010b; Easton & Hardy, 2009; Klesse, 2011; Munson & Steboun, 1999; Rubel & Bogaert, 2015; Sheff, 2014).

¹⁵ For more information on “living apart together” relationship arrangements, see (de Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013).

¹⁶ In 2016, 34.3 percent of the total population aged 15 and over was married in Quebec while 22.0% was living with a common-law partner. In comparison, in Canada, 45.7 percent was married and only 12.0 percent was living in a common-law union (Statistics Canada, 2017b).

interviews, and I decided to let women describe themselves, based on their own experiences, how their relationships usually develop.

I also chose to limit my sample to women aged 30 to 60 years old. First, motherhood and women's reproductive potential are often pointed out as elements influencing women's sexuality and intimate relationships. For instance, evolutionary psychology theorists (see Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992) posit that women's reproductive capacities play a central role in (heterosexual) mating patterns, as men are thought to be looking for the most fertile women. Other scholars have pointed out how motherhood is often expected to change how a woman expresses herself with regards to her sexuality (Friedman et al., 1998; Montemurro & Siefken, 2012). Including women who are between 30 and 60 — and therefore at different stages of their lives with regards to motherhood and their reproductive capacities — was intended to allow me to explore how issues related to reproduction and parenting might influence women's dating experiences.

Second, the stratified sampling strategy based on women's age was also an attempt to take into consideration the fact that younger and older women tend to differ in terms of how they expect their relationship to evolve. For instance, research shows women in their early thirties are much more likely than women over 50 to approach dating with the hope of finding their “happily ever after” love story (Lichtenstein, 2012), and to hope that their relationship will lead to marriage (Mahay & Lewin, 2007). Including women aged 30 to 60 was also a way for me to see if women of different ages varied in their experiences with age-hypogamous intimate relationships depending on their general romantic goals and expectations.

I also chose to restrict my sample to women aged 30-60 because the dating market changes significantly as women (and men) age. As I have pointed out earlier, starting roughly when individuals reach their 40s, the ratio of single women to single men starts to slowly increase in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017a), meaning that single women begin to outnumber single men. Furthermore, the age gap between men and their ideal female partner increases as they age (Buunk et al., 2001; South, 1991). In other words, women of different ages might have different perceptions of the dating market and of the amount of similar-age men available and interested in them, which in turn might influence their decision to engage in relationships with younger men. In fact, many have hypothesized that this “marriage squeeze” could influence older women’s decision to choose younger partners (see Laumann et al., 1994; Michael, 1995).

Finally, I chose to include women aged 30-60 in order to explore how real women who date younger men compare to cultural representations of ‘cougars’. Since the ‘cougar’ expression has been mostly used in the media to refer to middle-aged women (Aoun, 2013; Collard, 2012; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014), restricting my sample to middle-aged women who date younger men was the most logical decision. While it would have been interesting to explore the experiences of women in their 20s or those of women over 60, it was beyond the scope of this study.

One should note that there is a lot of variability in how ‘middle-aged’ is defined among scholars. For instance, Koch, Mansfield, Thurau, and Carey (2005) defined ‘middle-aged women’ as those aged 35 to 55 years old, whereas Carpenter et al. (2006) included women aged 40 to 59 years old. Similarly, ‘midlife’ is defined as the age period between 40 and 55 years old (Banister, 1999; Cain et al., 2003), the age period from 40 to 60 years old (Leiblum, 1990), the period from 35 to 59 years old (Fraser et al., 2004) or the age period between 30 and 60 (Montemurro & Siefken, 2014).

In this study, I refer to the women in my sample as ‘middle-aged women’. I use the ‘middle-aged’ qualifier as a way to distinguish individuals at midlife from ‘young adults’ — usually defined as individuals aged 18-30 (Côté, 2006), 18-25 (Arnett, 2004) or 25-35 (Konstam, 2015) — and ‘elders’ — often used to describe people aged 60 (or 65) and over (Dong, 2015; Goergen & Beaulieu, 2013).

As for my understanding of ‘younger men’ and ‘age-hypogamous relationship’, I chose to not provide a clear definition during recruitment. This decision was based on two considerations. First, the literature on age heterogamy in intimate relationships is characterized by a lack of consensus on what constitutes a considerable age gap between partners, and on when partners are considered to be of similar age. Age heterogamy has been defined using an age gap of three or more years (Darroch et al., 1999), a gap of four or more years (England et al., 2016; Vera et al., 1985), a gap of at least five years (Atkinson & Glass, 1985; Hall & Zhao, 1995; Shehan et al., 1991), and an age gap of a minimum 10 years (Lawton & Callister, 2010; Lehmillier & Agnew, 2008; Proulx et al., 2006). Montemurro and Siefken (2014) found that even a one-year age gap could lead friends and family to tease a woman and call her ‘cougar’. Therefore, instead of arbitrarily deciding on what constitutes a noticeable ‘age difference’, I left it open, permitting women to decide how large the age difference had to be before they recognized themselves as dating a ‘younger man’.

I also restricted my sample to Canadian-born women because I wanted to alleviate the confounding effect of cultural differences. Considering that the research question guiding my inquiry was influenced by North American cultural representations of ‘cougars’ — and that I was interested in exploring, among other things, how women who date younger men related to such cultural representations — it was crucial to limit my sample to women who were from Canada. While I could have included immigrant women who have been residing in Canada for several years,

including only women who grew up here decreases the risk of having cultural differences complicating the portrait. Lastly, considering how age-hypogamous intimate relationships are not that common, and that excluding women who were married with and/or cohabitating with their younger partners would further reduce the number of women who might correspond to my sampling criteria, I chose to include any women who had had at least one age-hypogamous intimate relationship within the last three years.

Recruitment

I conducted this study in the city of Montreal, in the province of Quebec (Canada). I chose this location based on two main considerations. First, considering the cultural taboo surrounding age-hypogamous intimate relationships, it is likely that trying to date younger men is a different reality when one resides in a small village compared to a large city. It is much easier to engage in non-traditional intimate relationships in a large city, as most people do not know one another. Furthermore, since they are more populated, large cities offer more options to single women looking for intimate partners, which increases the odds of finding younger male partners. With more than 1.6 million population — not counting the areas surrounding the city — (Statistics Canada, 2012), its cultural diversity, and its vibrant nightlife, Montreal is a typical large North American metropolitan area.

Quebec is no exception to the age hypergamy trend found in the U.S. and the rest of Canada. Indeed, among all of the heterosexual marriages celebrated in 2015 in Quebec, roughly two out of three comprised of a husband who was at least one year older than his wife, whereas only 22 percent of marriages comprised of a woman who was at least one year older than her partner. In fact, the average age difference among all of those newly married couples that year was 4.6 years

(Institut de la Statistique du Québec, 2016), with the male partner being the oldest within the couple.

Participants were recruited through bilingual (English/French) flyers that I distributed in various locations and at different events that attract middle-aged women, such as public talks on women's health or sexuality, semi-private activities organized for single people in Montreal, after-work cocktail events (called "5@7" by French-speaking Quebecers) in popular bars throughout the city, public fairs targeting female consumers, etc. I also publicized my study on social media such as Facebook and dating websites, which turned out to be a very fruitful recruitment approach. I posted the electronic version of my flyer on the discussion board of dozens of Facebook groups that I thought could be of interest to middle-aged women (e.g. groups for single middle-aged people, groups for mothers, etc.) as well as on my own personal page.

While I cannot know how many people shared my flyer through social media and how many people saw my flyer appear on their newsfeed, I do know that my flyer circulated well beyond my own network, as I received many messages from prospective participants from various regions throughout the province and from other Canadian provinces. In fact, most of the women who contacted me about the study reported having seen my flyer on Facebook or being informed of my study by a Facebook friend. Finally, a snowball sampling technique was also used to recruit several participants.

The title of the recruitment flyer indicated that women who were sleeping with or dating a younger man were invited to participate in a study (see Appendix A). One could read the following selection criteria on the flyer: Canadian-born women; who were aged 30-60 years old; who spoke French or English fluently; who had recently dated or slept with a younger man; and who were not married

to nor living with their younger partner. Before scheduling an interview with a potential participant, I would ask her a few basic questions about her experiences with age-hypogamous intimate relationships in order to make sure her latest experience with age-hypogamous intimate relationships was recent, and to confirm that she fit all of the other selection criteria. I would also send the prospective participant the “Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans”, which confirmed that my research had been deemed ethically acceptable by the Research Ethics Board Office of McGill University.

In order to have enough participants in each of the three age groups I needed for this study, I aimed to get approximately 55-60 participants in total, and to get a similar number of participants in each category. While recruiting women aged 30 to 45 was relatively easy, I had to spend more energy and time trying to find women over 45 who could participate in my study. In order to find more women over 45, I had to modify my flyer and restrict my age criteria to 45-60-year-old. It is unclear why I faced more obstacles recruiting women aged 45 to 60. It could be that there are less women of that age who were dating younger men. To my knowledge, no Canadian studies have evaluated the prevalence of age-hypogamous intimate relationships in non-cohabitational/non-marital (i.e., dating) relationships. However, data from a 2003 American survey showed that roughly one in five single women age 40-69 reported that their current or last male partner was at least 5 years younger than them (Montenegro, 2003). Another explanation could be that the recruitment methods used here might not have been the most useful to reach women in that age group. Nevertheless, I still managed to find enough participants aged 50-60 to reach saturation.

My final sample includes 59 women: 22 women were in their 30s, 22 women in their 40s, and 15 aged 50-60, which I will refer to “women in their 50s” from now on. Slightly more than half of the sample had children (31 women), and the rest (28) had no children (see Appendix D for the

questionnaire used to gather the following sociodemographic information about the participants). While there were women without children in each age group, there were a higher proportion of childless women in the 30-39-year-old age group. And while more than half of the women in their 30s had never experienced a common-law union or been married, only one woman in her 40s and no women in their 50s reported never having experienced that type of relationship.

With regards to individual income, the sample as a whole was slightly skewed towards the 30-60K category. Eight participants reported making \$0-\$29,999 annually, 28 women reporting making \$30,000-\$59,999, 10 participants reporting an annual income of \$60,000-\$89,999, nine women reporting making \$90,000 or more per year, and four women preferred not to disclose. Unsurprisingly, considering the effect of age on income, younger participants were more likely than older ones to report making less than 30K per year.

This study's sample comprised of a majority of college educated women; the majority of women in their 30s and 40s, and roughly half of the women in their 50s possessed at least an undergraduate diploma. As a sub-group, women in their 30s were slightly more educated than the women in their 40s and 50s; almost half of the women in the 30-39 category had a graduate degree compared to less than one out of three women in their 50s. Only a few women in this study had not finished their high school curriculum or had stopped their education after receiving their high school diploma.

Table 1- Participants' Parental Status

		Women in their 30s (n=22)	Women in their 40s (n=22)	Women in their 50s (n=15)
Parental status	Mother	5	15	11
	No children	17	7	4

Table 2- Participants' Marital Status

		Women in their 30s (n=22)	Women in their 40s (n=22)	Women in their 50s (n=15)
Marital status	Never married and never in a common-law union (CLU)	12	1	0
	Never married, but has in a CLU before	8	13	2
	Divorced/ Separated/ Widowed	2	8	13

Table 3- Participants' Income

		Women in their 30s (n=22)	Women in their 40s (n=22)	Women in their 50s (n=15)
Income	\$0 - \$29,999	6	2	0
	\$30,000 - \$59,999	12	8	8
	\$60,000 - \$89,999	1	7	2
	\$90 +	2	4	3
	Prefer not to disclose	1	1	2

With regards to participants' race/ethnicity, the sample in this study is almost exclusively white. Indeed, only two women reported belonging to a non-Caucasian group. This lack of racial diversity can be explained with my decision to limit my sample to native-born Canadians. While the two women of color in this study did not talk about their race/ethnicity as an element influencing their experiences with younger men, and while their discourse did not appear to be different than those of white participants, the lack of racial/ethnic diversity in this sample is an important limitation one should keep in mind when considering the applicability of these results to non-white women dating younger men (see Appendix B for an overview of the sample).

Table 4- Participants' Level of Education

		Women in their 30s (n=22)	Women in their 40s (n=22)	Women in their 50s (n=15)
Education	Highschool diploma or less	1	1	2
	CEGEP or vocational studies diploma	4	8	6
	Undergraduate degree	7	9	3
	Graduate degree	10	4	4

Data collection and analysis

In order to make participants feel as comfortable as possible, I offered three potential interview locations. I asked them to choose their preferred location between a nearby coffee shop, a private room in a library at McGill University, or their home. Before I began asking the interview questions, I first explained the interview process, the purpose of the study, and when and how they could get access to the results once the study would be completed. I informed participants that they were allowed to ask me to rephrase a question, to skip a question, and to stop the interview at any time if they were no longer comfortable with participating. Then, I provided participants with a consent form indicating their rights as participants, and who to contact if they had any questions

concerning the ethicality of the project (see Appendix C). Participants were asked to confirm in writing their desire to participate in the study and that they agreed to be recorded; all participants agreed to be recorded.

After participants signed the consent form, I asked them to fill out a short questionnaire which allowed me to gather some basic socio-demographic information about them (see Appendix D for the questionnaire). The interview guide used in this study was comprised of open-ended questions encouraging women to tell me their stories and focus on the aspects of their experiences that mattered most to them (e.g. “How does the age difference influence the way you see the future with your partner?”), and more specific questions which allowed me to explore particular facets of women’s experiences (e.g. “Do you feel like having children/not having children influences your interactions or relationships with younger men? And if so, how?”). I asked questions that allowed me to understand when they began to date younger men, what led them to choose younger partners, how they met their younger partners, what characteristics they considered important when evaluating the desirability of a partner and to what extent age mattered, how they interpreted younger men’s interest for them, how age-hypogamous intimate relationships differed from relationships with men their age or older, and how they saw the future of their relationships with younger men (see Appendix E for the interview guide).

Interviews were carried out in English and/or French, depending on the participant’s preference. For the purpose of this dissertation, participants’ quotes were translated in English, if they were originally in French. I conducted all the interviews. Interviews lasted on average 1 hour and 45 minutes; the shortest interview lasted 1 hour and 7 minutes and the longest 2 hours and 47 minutes. At the end of the interview, each participant was provided with a list of psychosocial resources, in the (unlikely) event that our conversation brought up negative emotions (see Appendix F). While

no follow-up interviews were conducted, many participants sent me additional comments via email in the following days to add to the answers they had provided during their in-person interviews. No financial compensation was offered.

During each interview, I would take detailed notes on the content of the interview, but also on other details, such as my perception of our rapport, a description of the interview location, a description of the participant's appearance, etc. While this additional information was not directly used in this dissertation, it allowed me to keep a detailed memory of my encounter with each participant. I would transcribe these field notes into a Word document the same day, while the memory of our meeting was still fresh. The names of participants, the names of other people they mentioned, as well as specific information that could allow someone to recognize a participant were changed to maintain confidentiality.

In order to analyze the data, I used the software MAXQDA 12. The first round of coding that I conducted was guided by the main questions used in my interview guide, which allowed me to begin the analysis with a list of 'prefigured' codes. However, I was also actively looking for new themes, which led me to create new codes as I was advancing in the data analysis process. Once the first round of coding was complete and my list of codes was finalized, I did a second round of coding in order to ensure I had classified all pertinent information within the appropriate codes.

This time, I analyzed interviews one age group at a time, which allowed me to see more clearly if there were differences in the way women of different ages talked about their experiences. Having a better grasp of my data, I was then able to see salient themes. In qualitative research, themes are "broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). With a clear idea of the main themes that could potentially be used to

write my final narrative, I wrote a detailed one-page memo for each interview in which I summarized the participant's experiences by themes, using a bullet point format so I could easily find the information. These memos were helpful as it provided me with a quick overview of a participant's experiences.

The following three chapters represent some of the main themes that were found in my interviews, and that allowed me to better understand the four facets of women's experiences that I was interested in, as mentioned earlier. In the first results chapter, I analyze the way women talk about how they met their younger partners in an effort to understand the ways women challenge/reproduce the gendered prescriptions for appropriate behavior found in the traditional dating script. The second results chapter is dedicated to the sexual dynamics within age-hypogamous intimate relationships. The last one explores the considerations influencing women's perception of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships' longevity potential.

CHAPTER 3 — RELATIONSHIP FORMATION AND (THE MYTH OF) THE OLDER WOMAN CHASING YOUNGER MEN

Studies showed that, when it comes to the first moments of heterosexual intimate relationship formation, men are generally expected to play an active role in communicating their interest and making key gestures intended to signal that they would like the relationship to be more than platonic. Women, on the other hand, are expected to play a more passive role; they are encouraged to wait for men's propositions and to limit themselves to reactive behavior, that is accepting/refusing men's romantic gestures or sexual advances (Eaton & Rose, 2011; England et al., 2008; Kurth et al., 2000; Lamont, 2014; Laner & Ventrone, 1998; Paynter & Leaper, 2016).

While this dating script might seem outdated — especially considering the shifts in norms and attitudes regarding sexuality that now provide individuals with greater flexibility in terms of what is deemed acceptable behavior (Allyn, 2000; Jonason & Marks, 2009; Kamen, 2000; Lévy, 2008a; Paynter & Leaper, 2016; Reid, Elliott, & Webber, 2011) — research shows that formal guidelines regarding men's and women's roles during initial romantic encounters do exist and that they have remained rather static since the 1950s (Eaton & Rose, 2011; Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Morr Serewicz & Gale, 2008; Rose & Frieze, 1989). For instance, over the years, many studies have shown that when asked to describe a typical heterosexual first date, both male and female participants produce a script with rigid gender roles, one that is male-dominated and where women are depicted as having little agency (Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Morr Serewicz & Gale, 2008; Rose & Frieze, 1989). Specifically, men are depicted as leading the first date from start to finish, asking the woman out, picking her up, paying for the date, taking the woman home, and initiating the first kiss and/or sexual advances. In fact, England et al. (2008) found that while a vast majority of young

men and women say it is acceptable for women to be the one asking the man on a first date, very few young women actually do so.

Eaton and Rose (2011) have also found evidence of a highly gender-typed dating script within dating advice books. For instance, analyzing the content of seven popular books published between 2004 and 2009, they found that this type of literature generally promoted passivity for women and agency for men. Women were encouraged to use indirect influence and passive strategies in order to prompt the development of their intimate relationships, without threatening men's (alleged) inherent need to feel like the leader. While in some of those books, women were at times encouraged to take more initiative — such as asking the man out — they were often reminded later not to show *too much* initiative; for instance, they were advised to allow men to take the lead when planning the date and/or during the date.

While there is clear evidence that women tend to abide by gendered prescriptions regarding key gestures intended to propel the relationship further (e.g. asking one on a date, initiating the first kiss, proposing marriage), recent studies show that women are not wholly passive, and that they often subtly encourage men to make such gestures. Indeed, based on interviews with women aged 25-40, Lamont (2014) found that in order to facilitate the progression of their intimate relationships, women resorted to indirect cues, allowing them to show their interest without directly challenging the boundaries of expected dating behavior for women. For instance, many of Lamont's participants would flirt with men they were interested in, but would wait for those men to ask them on a date. Others would talk about engagement rings and marriage but wait for their boyfriend to officially propose. These strategies allowed women to influence the development of intimate relationships without stepping on male territory and taking too much of a leading role in steering the relationship in the desired direction.

Eaton and Rose (2011) proposed potential explanations for the stability of the heterosexual dating script over time. One explanation is that the tenacity of the traditional dating script simply mirrors the gender inequalities that are still present in our society. They also suggested that individuals likely reproduce the traditional script in an effort to appear socially savvy and make a good impression. Reproducing traditional gender roles during the relationship formation process, they argued, might also reflect individuals' efforts to use a language understood by all in order to reduce the anxiety associated with meeting someone new.

One should note that most of the research on men's and women's expectations regarding dating practices, and on their actual dating behavior has been conducted on young adults. Indeed, there is very little scholarship on dating among middle-aged individuals (Lichtenstein, 2012). It is thus unclear to what extent older individuals subscribe to the conventional dating script and reproduce traditional gender roles during their first interactions with a prospective partner. Interestingly, representations of age-hypogamous intimate relationships in the media suggest that some older women, at least those interested in younger men, do not hesitate to actively communicate their interest to prospective partners and to take the lead with regard to relationship formation. Indeed, the 'cougar' is often imagined as a confident woman, as someone who actively seeks younger male partners, as the one approaching younger men and overtly seducing them (Aoun, 2013; Collard, 2012; Lawton & Callister, 2010; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014).

While the image of the confident older woman actively searching for and seducing younger men is quite prevalent in the media, there is no empirical evidence indicating whether or not middle-aged women in age-hypogamous intimate relationships challenge conventional gender norms regarding relationship formation. In this chapter, I explore how women discuss the way their age-hypogamous intimate relationships were first formed, with the intent of shedding light on the roles

men and women play in those first moments. More specifically, I investigate to what extent women challenge/reproduce the gendered prescriptions for appropriate behavior found in the traditional dating script, with a specific focus on relationship formation.

First, I found that most women avoided presenting themselves as having purposely searched for a younger man. Indeed, a large portion of participants in each age group explained meeting younger men as the result of pure coincidence, as something that “just happened”. That said, the tendency to present oneself as having played a rather passive role in initiating their age-hypogamous intimate relationships was much more pronounced among those who were in their 40s and 50s than among 30-something women. In fact, clarifying whether they had planned or had made conscious efforts to find and seduce their younger partners seemed to be a much more important and sensitive topic to women in their 40s and 50s compared to those in their 30s.

Most women in their 40s and 50s (but very few women in their 30s) described their first interactions with younger men in a way that mirrors the traditional gendered script for relationship formation; most often, younger men were depicted as having played an active role, actively pursuing older women and trying to convince them to accept their propositions, and women described themselves as having merely reacted to younger men’s advances. Furthermore, many women over 40 reported having initially resisted younger men’s propositions, and having waited for younger men to prove they were deserving of their attention. One should also note that a majority of women in their 40s and 50s (but very few women in their 30s) also described themselves as having been somewhat indirectly pushed towards younger men by men their age. According to these participants, accepting younger men’s propositions was almost inevitable considering that available men their age preferred younger female partners, and/or that ‘age-appropriate’ men left on the dating market were not up to their standards.

Then, I explore why the tendency to present oneself as having played a rather passive role in initiating their age-hypogamous intimate relationships was much more pronounced among those who were in their 40s and 50s than among 30-something women. First, I argue that these results reflect the fact that older women were generally more negatively affected than younger participants by the societal discourse indicating that a woman's worth declines with age. Indeed, letting younger men approach them allowed older participants to confirm that younger men were truly interested in them and to reduce the (perceived) high risk of rejection in light of their age. The "younger men as pursuers" discourse also allowed older participants to challenge sexist and ageist conceptions of older women's value on the dating market and to reaffirm their own desirability as intimate partners.

Second, I argue that these results can only be understood if one also considers that the risk of being criticized for presenting oneself as highly desiring is higher for older women than it is for younger women. I suggest that positioning themselves as rather passive players in the relationship formation process was a way for women in their 40s and 50s to avoid the potential stigma associated not only with age hypogamy but also with being read as too sexually desiring *for their age*. Describing younger men as chasing older women allowed older participants to neutralize potential accusations of deviant behavior in two ways. First, it allowed women to re-inscribe their behavior within the confines of traditional normative expectations regarding female behavior in the dating context. Second, it allowed women to deflect the responsibility of their unconventional relationship onto someone else (i.e. younger men), which is a common "technique of neutralization" that individuals engaged in deviant behavior use defend their behavior and to preserve a positive sense of self (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

“I didn’t do anything; It just happened”

When describing how their age-hypogamous intimate relationships began, many of the women in this study insisted that they were not searching for younger men, and that they ended up with a younger man by coincidence. Indeed, more than half of the women in this study described the beginning of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships as something that “just happened” without them playing a role that could shape the course of events. This tendency to describe meeting and getting intimately involved with younger men as something unplanned and out of their control was common among women in all three age groups.

Ivana, a 50-year-old divorced woman, reported having almost exclusively dated younger men since her young adult years, and having had dozens of younger sex partners. At the time of her interview, she was romantically involved with two younger men — 36-year-old Oscar and 31-year-old Robin — both of who she had been dating in a non-exclusive way for roughly three years. While she expressed a clear preference for younger men during her interview, it appeared important for her to highlight how she had never purposely *searched* for younger men, how meeting younger men just kept happening to her. For instance, when explaining why most of her intimate relationships had been age-hypogamous, she said: “*Personally, I’m not looking for them; it’s as if they fall into my lap*”.

Using statements indicating how women were not responsible for meeting younger men was quite common among younger participants as well. On many occasions during her interview, 30-year-old Jackie stated that that she never approached the dating market with the intent of finding herself a younger partner. Describing how she ended up with her 23-year-old boyfriend, a man she had been dating for the past 3 months, she insisted that she was not trying to meet a younger man when

she met him. Describing how she ended up with a man seven years her junior, she said: “*He wasn’t aiming for an older woman. I wasn’t aiming for a younger man. You know, it just happened that way. I didn’t do anything to make it happen.*”

Quite often, it appeared that women were trying to downplay the role they played in the relationship formation process, as they tended to leave out certain information that could paint them as having played an active role in initiating their relationship with younger men. For instance, women’s tendency to portray how they ended up with younger men as something that “just happened” was used by some of the women who had previously mentioned setting the age preference filters on their dating applications or online dating profiles so they would mostly (if not exclusively) find or be ‘matched’ with younger men.

Until two years ago, 60-year-old Edith was married to a man 13 years her senior. In the past year, she had three younger intimate partners who were all in their 20s or early 30s. Throughout her interview, Edith seemed quite reluctant to present herself as having purposely tried to meet younger men even though she acknowledged preferring younger men to men her age or older. According to her, the fact that she had set her age preference settings to ‘30-60’ on her online dating profile was proof that she was not purposely trying to find younger men; she did give a chance to men her age by allowing the search engine to show her their profiles:

*I don’t go out looking for young men, you know what I mean? On the website or in life. [...] it’s just what has worked, from a mutual attraction point of view. It’s not something that I’m looking for specifically. I’m not looking specifically for a younger person, it’s just happened that way. Which is why I have my upper range at 60 [on the dating website], which is my age.
(Edith, 60-year-old, mother, separated)*

Many women were reluctant to use terms indicating a high level of agency such as “choice” or “decision” when they described how they ended up with a younger partner, therefore avoiding language that would portray them as having played an active role in the relationship formation process. For instance, in her interview, 33-year-old Yasmina mentioned that she had selected ‘24-36’ when asked to enter her age preference on her dating application, meaning that she would only be presented with prospective partners within that age range. She also admitted that she tended to ‘like’¹⁷ younger men’s profile much more often than men her age/older men’s profiles. However, when explaining how she ended up dating younger men, she refused to describe herself as having chosen her younger partners:

I can’t even say it was a choice in my case. It just happened like this. Yes, I set a lower age bracket [as a filter in my online search], because yes physically, as I said earlier, they attract me more. But I’m not walking around, showing off and saying “Haha! I’m lucky, I caught myself a young one!”
(Yasmina, 33-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Overall, regardless of their age, many women tended to describe their age-hypogamous intimate relationships’ beginning as resulting out of pure coincidence and to present themselves as having had little control over the partner selection process. As discussed above, there were many indications that women were often minimizing how they had influenced things in a way that would increase their odds of meeting younger men (i.e. setting their age preferences on their dating profile) when explaining how they ended up with younger partners. In the next section, I show that

¹⁷ On certain dating applications, two people can only start chatting if the two of them have ‘liked’ each other’s profiles. When a woman presses on the ‘like’ button, she not only signals her interest to the person whose profile she ‘liked’, but she also unlocks the mechanism preventing that person to contact her. Both partners need to ‘like’ each other’s profile (i.e. express their interest in one another) before any communication can begin.

while many women in all three age groups deflected the responsibility of their non-traditional relationships onto factors out of their control and used the “it just happened” rhetoric when explaining how they got involved in intimate relationships with younger men, the tendency to present oneself as having played a rather passive role in the relationship formation process was more pronounced among women in their 40s and 50s than among women in their 30s.

“They’re the ones chasing the cougar”: Younger men as pursuers

While most women in their 30s did not wish to be read as having purposely searched for younger partners and explained meeting younger men as something that resulted out of coincidence, one should note that they often presented themselves as having played an active role in communicating their interest and developing their relationship once the first contact with their younger partner had been established. Indeed, women in their 30s often described themselves as having made key gestures intended to propel the relationship beyond the first interaction such as asking for the man’s number, initiating the first kiss, or being the one to propose sex for the first time. However, these women were careful not to completely reverse the gender roles found in the traditional dating script; very few women in their 30s depicted themselves as the dominant partner, as the one who led the relationship formation process while younger men were passively waiting to be seduced. In fact, they usually depicted themselves and their younger partners as having played an equally active role in signaling their interest to one another and making key gestures intended to influence the development of their relationship.

For instance, 30-year-old Jackie depicted the process that led to her first sexual encounter with her 23-year-old boyfriend as a two-person dance they equally partook in. According to her, while he was the one who approached her at a music show, she was the one who invited him over for sex the same night:

He was the one that approached me, putting his hand on my back and asking me my name... and that's it [...] He complimented one of my tattoos. So, we started talking about that [...] We talked a little about ourselves, what we do in life, why we're here at the music show. So we started talking about music too, and uhhh, it just clicked! [So I decided] I was bringing him back to my place to sleep with him. (Jackie, 30-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Women in their 40s and 50s, on the other hand, most often described the relationship formation process as one that was led almost entirely by their younger partners. Indeed, more than four out of five women over 40 and more than half of women in their 50s insisted that their younger partners were the ones who pursued them, and they presented themselves as having merely reacted to younger men's propositions. Furthermore, many of these women reported having initially resisted younger men's advances and depicted their younger partners as having been quite persistent in their attempts to convince them to overcome their apprehension. They explained that their younger partners had been particularly charming which eventually led them to let their guard down. In recounting their experiences, these women completely flipped the 'cougar' stereotype commonly found in the media and re-inscribed their own behavior within the confines of the traditional courtship norms; younger men were portrayed as the dominant partner, making the first move, actively trying to convince reluctant older women to give them a chance, and charming older women until they finally accepted their propositions.

Henrietta explained how she ended up on a date with Zack, a man 22 years her junior who she ultimately dated for roughly a month. After her relationship with the father of her children came to an end, the 45-year-old woman decided to join an online dating website. When she first received a message in her online dating mailbox from Zack, Henrietta immediately thought he was too young for her, and she clearly let him know that she was not interested in him. Despite her

resistance, he kept writing to her, trying to prove he was deserving of her attention. With time, she found him increasingly interesting and charming which led her to eventually accept to have a date with him:

Zack wrote to me. And then, personally, it was “No, no, no! There is no way. I don’t want that”. [...] But you know, he would write to me, I would respond. [...] And then, at one point, he said “Well, I’d like to meet you.” And I was very reluctant. He worked hard, he worked really hard! He was very persistent, like very persistent. And then, I said “Ok. You’re an interesting guy. We have things to say to each other. We can meet each other and we’ll see.”

(Henrietta, 45-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)

Felicity recalled how she met 30-year-old Sebastien, a man she had been dating, in a sexually non-exclusive way for roughly two months at the time of her interview. The 40-year-old woman, who had met her younger partner in the metro on her way to work, explained that she was initially reluctant to accept his sexual proposition; however, he dedicated much time and energy trying to convince her to sleep with him, emphasizing how he had much experience with older women and what a great lover he was.

We worked in the same area. I noticed a few times that he was looking at me in the metro. I was reading one day... and you know when you have the impression that someone is looking at you? I kept looking up and he was looking at me. While leaving the metro, he sort of gave me a smile. I thought "Oh ok, he's cute!" But I knew he was young. And the next day we both took the metro again and he got in the same car as me (laugh). And then, he sat in front of me and he wouldn't stop looking at me. So finally I said "Well, hi". We started talking, he took my phone number and we saw each other a few times. But I wasn't sure that I wanted things to go further. But younger guys are persistent. He wanted to prove to me that he was a good lover. He told me he had dated many women, and that he had dated many women older than him. And he was very proud of his sexual prowess. Oh yes! And he really made his case! And eventually, I said "Ok, fine!" , I accepted to sleep with him. In the end, he was indeed quite a good lover (laugh).

(Felicity, 40-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

A large proportion of the participants in their 40s and 50s reported having met most (or all) of their younger partners online. In fact, the vast majority women over 40 who had used dating websites or applications in order to meet intimate partners insisted that on such social media platforms there were a high number of younger men actively searching for older women. Many women in their 40s and 50s mentioned being bombarded of messages from younger men looking for older female partners.

For instance, in the last two years, 52-year-old Iris has been single and using dating websites as a way to meet men. Describing her experience of online dating, she elaborated on how surprised she was to see so many men in their 20s approach her. While she preferred younger men as intimate partners and had dated a few men in their early 40s recently, she explained that there was a limit to how much younger she was willing to go and stated that she would never accept propositions from men younger than 30 years old. She elaborated on how common it is for women her age to be approached by younger men on dating websites:

*It would be so easy for me to have 20-year-old lovers. My filter gets filled everyday by messages from 20-year-old men! It's crazy! I receive so many messages, I deleted them all. I really had to use a filter in order not to receive their messages.
(Iris, 52-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)*

Making sense of this phenomenon, a large portion of the participants in their 40s and 50s argued that many younger men fantasize about older women and that they use the internet to get in touch with them. Like many participants her age, 40-year-old Felicity was impressed with the large number of younger men who approached her on dating websites. She believed that younger men

pursuing older women for intimate purposes was a phenomenon that was becoming increasingly common, and she explained that as the result of the sexualisation of older women found in pornographic videos or other mainstream media in recent years:

*On okcupid.com, I receive a lot of messages from younger men. Like, I don't know if it's a trend at the moment with shows, cougars, porn, I don't know... but there's something going on at a social level now, I think. More than before, I feel.
(Felicity, 40-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)*

Women's discourses resonate with recent statistical analysis of the composition of the dating market. Indeed, while there are more single women over 40 than single men of the same age on the dating market, when individuals are in their 20s and early 30s, it is the opposite. Among young adults, there are more single men than single women of the same age (Statistics Canada, 2017a; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2016b). This means that for single young adult men looking for an intimate partner, there are not enough single women in their age bracket.

Furthermore, recent studies of personal profiles on dating websites revealed that unlike middle-aged or elderly heterosexual men, men in their 20s tend to indicate being interested in women who are either younger or several years older than themselves (Conway et al., 2015). In fact, Buunk et al. (2001) found that when men in their 20s are asked to describe maximum age they would want a casual sex female partner to be, they report on average being interested in women more than 10 years their senior. One should note that these young men are less flexible, however, when asked about the maximum age for a marriage partner.

Overall, according to most of the women in their 40s and 50s, the relationship formation process for age-hypogamous intimate relationships is one that generally follows the traditional gendered

script where men play an active role, and women's role is limited to a reactive one. According to the women in this study, there are a considerable number of younger men who are actively searching for older intimate partners, a phenomenon that is quite visible on dating websites or applications where women receive lots of messages from younger men. Compared to older participants, women in their 30s played a more active role in the relationship formation process with younger men. However, their effort to challenge normative expectations regarding acceptable female behavior during the relationship formation process was usually limited to participating *as much* as their younger partners in communicating their interest.

“[For] women my age, like there's nobody”: Feeling pushed towards younger men

A majority of women in their 40s and in their 50s explained why they got involved in age-hypogamous intimate relationships in part by deflecting the responsibility for their relationships' beginning onto men their age or older. These women explained their involvement in age-hypogamous intimate relationships by arguing that men their age are rarely interested in them and/or contending that single men their age are often not suitable options. While this type of discourse was quite common among women over 40, less than a fifth of the women in their 30s explain their decision to engage in age-hypogamous intimate relationships by blaming men their age or older.

First, roughly two out of five women over 40 described themselves as having been indirectly pushed towards younger men because men their age preferred younger women and rarely gave a chance to women of comparable ages. Indeed, these women explained that in real life, or on dating websites or applications, men their age rarely approached them. According to the women in this study, men in their 40s and 50s tend to look for women who are much younger than them and to

discard women in their own age-bracket. Many women explained their decision to accept younger men's propositions as partly influenced by the fact that men their age were not interested in them.

For instance, 42-year-old Olivia only began to date younger men in the last few years, as she had been in a serious relationship with the same man — a man her age — since she was 20. She explained that in the last few years, she had been searching for a man her age, with the hopes of eventually developing another long-lasting committed relationship. However, she reported that men her age she found interesting were either already married or not interested in her. Therefore, since she did not want to remain without a partner, she began to date younger men, but in a casual way, without “allowing her heart” to imagine that her age-hypogamous intimate relationships could be more than flings. In the past three years, she had had several casual, non-exclusive intimate relationships with younger men. At the time of her interview, Olivia had been seeing, for several months and in a non-exclusive way, both 23-year-old William and 24-year-old George. She elaborated on her the reasons why she had been dating younger men recently:

*Well right now, ideally, I'm looking for a partner who is more or less in my age bracket, you know? Hum.... for a monogamous relationship. But I'm having a very hard time finding men my age who are single who are interested in me, so, hum, in the meantime (small laugh) I'm seeing younger men. Hum... But I mean, it's not with the goal of ending up with them “happily ever after” or anything.
(Olivia, 42-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)*

Whitney reported having had several age-hypogamous intimate relationships while being in her 30s and early 40s. The 43-year-old woman mentioned that she had developed strong feelings for some of the younger men she had dated. Unfortunately, those relationships had never lasted very long. During her interview, she mentioned repeatedly how she wished she would stop falling for younger men, as these relationships always ended up in heartbreak for her. Now, dating a 32-year-

old man she met on vacation several months ago, she explained that despite her best efforts to find a man her age, she somehow often ended up in age-hypogamous intimate relationships. She argued that men her age preferred women in their early thirties, and depicted that as partly explaining why she often found herself dating younger man again despite “not wanting to”:

I was like “No, no! I’m done dating younger men”. Seriously, I’m really attracted by older men. And it’s true. I see them walking around in the streets, sometimes, very good-looking men in their 40s... My God! But men in their 40s, they are looking at 35-year-old women, 30-year-old women. I’m no longer in the game. Now I’m in the realm of 50-year-old men. So now I’m like “Oh man...” (disappointed tone).

(Whitney, 43-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

One should note that these participants’ perceptions of the dating market as being somewhat unfavorable to older women is not unfounded. Statistically, it has been shown that the proportion of single women begins to surpass that of single men of the same age starting roughly at age 40 (England & McClintock, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2017a; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2016b). This is explained by sex differences in mortality rates and the fact that, as men get older, they tend to prefer female partners who are increasingly younger than them (England & McClintock, 2009). There is also empirical evidence supporting women’s perceptions that single, middle-aged men tend to discriminate against women their age when searching for an intimate partner, a phenomenon that is particularly visible on dating websites where individuals’ age preferences are often clearly indicated (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Conway et al., 2015; Pixley et al., 2007; Skopek et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, in many cases, the tendency for middle-aged men to search for younger women was only a part of the reason why many women over 40 felt pushed towards younger men. A majority

of women over 40, I interviewed, talked about the (perceived) “low-quality” of single men in their age bracket as constraining their ability to choose intimate partners, and as acting as an external force propelling them into the arms of younger men. These women’s argument was often that they were not discriminating men based on age per se; if there were more single men their age that possessed the traits they found desirable, they would consider them. But since most of single men in their age bracket were (perceived as) making very little efforts to make themselves appealing, these women felt that accepting younger men’s advances was the best decision they could make.

For instance, 60-year-old Edith seemed reluctant to fully acknowledge that she preferred younger men, and she was careful not to portray herself as having purposely chosen younger men. When explaining her choices to her friends, she would emphasize the (perceived) limited number of single men her age on the dating market and point out how those who are single are not viable options in her eyes. Describing what she told her friends when they asked her why all of her recent intimate partners were roughly three decades younger than her, she said:

[For] women my age, like there’s nobody. People would ask, “Aren’t you interested [in men your age]? And I said “Yeah, in theory” [...] And then I said “Well give me one suggestion of someone [my age]”. And still to this day they couldn’t think of anybody. [Not] a single person. Because they are either married, or they [my friends] know we won’t connect. And I’ve been very lucky with the men I’ve met. Spectacularly smart, gorgeous. So I kind of set my sights very high [...] So for now, we’ll continue [my younger partners and I].
(Edith, 60-year-old, mother, separated)

When detailing the traits that they found unappealing in men their age and that influenced their decision to consider age-hypogamous intimate relationships, women in their 40s and 50s most often reported the following considerations. A large portion of them reported that many of the

single men their age that they had encountered were emotionally bruised from past relationships and had a negative attitude and/or outlook on life. Many women in this study also perceived men their age as lacking energy, as being in bad physical shape, and/or having health issues. Many of these women also perceived men their age or older as having monotonous lives, as showing no desire to step out of their routine and try new activities. Others complained that men their age were expecting women to invest a lot of energy in maintaining a pleasing physical appearance, whereas they would not apply the same standard for themselves. Finally, many women also reported being often unsatisfied with the sexual performances of men their age or older (see chapter 4 for further discussion).

For instance, Odette found herself single again at age 40, after her separation from her long-term, common-law partner. When she began to date again, she was looking for fun, uncomplicated short-term flings. She explained that she was open to dating men her age but, unfortunately, the type of men in her age bracket that she met were, in her eyes, not very interesting options. Indeed, the 42-year-old mother felt that men her age were often angry or disillusioned because of their previous failed relationships, and therefore that conversations with them tended to be heavy and unpleasant. She also mentioned that many men her age had erectile dysfunction, which complicated sexual interactions. Therefore, she ended up dating mostly men in their 20s or early-mid 30s. Describing her experience trying to meet men her age, Odette said:

You want to know why I ended up with lots of younger men, and why I wouldn't want to be in a serious relationship with a man my age? All the single men in their 40s that I was meeting, they were all fucked up. They... sexually, romantically, [...] They had lots of problems, I felt. [...] things from past relationships that they never got over. Or it turned out badly and they stayed frustrated over it. [...] I didn't find that particularly attractive.

(Odette, 42-year-old, mother, divorced)

Similarly, Tatianna reported that finding a similar-age partner who fit her criteria was arduous. The 49-year-old woman became single again three years ago, after her 10-year marriage came to an end. Since then, she had had several younger intimate partners in their 20s or early 30s, one of which became her current boyfriend. During her interview, she explained that when she began to search for intimate partners as a newly single woman in her late 40s, she was open to the idea of being with a man her age. However, she felt that the dating market provided very few viable options in her age-bracket. Considering that there were so many handsome and interesting younger men approaching her on dating websites with hopes of getting her attention, ending up with younger men was, in her eyes, almost unavoidable. Currently dating 31-year-old Omar, Tatianna said:

To find someone your age that interests you, I'd say that it is very, very difficult! All the good guys, they are either in relationships, divorced and bitter, not my type, too old, or whatever. While in the dating pool of 30-year-old men, they are all handsome, and they are the way I like them. [...] Young men are still vibrant, they aren't damaged by a previous long-term relationship, by a bad breakup with lawyers, kids, and all that heavy stuff! It's like, oh my God! So it's hard, because I find that what I can't find what I want among men my age. So it's certain you'll go see elsewhere. And when you have a plethora of guys in their 30s that are hitting on you, at a certain point you say... You give in! You say "Fuck it, ok. I'm happy with that."

(Tatianna, 49-year-old, no children, divorced)

Like other women in their 40s and 50s, 56-year-old Béatrice complained about the quality of men her age that approached her. The 56-year old mother of two reported that since her divorce, more than a decade ago, she had mostly dated younger men. Explaining her recent partnering choices, she tended to deflect the responsibility of her age-hypogamous intimate relationships onto men their age or older, criticizing the (perceived) lack of effort men dedicated to their physical appearance:

*I wasn't closed off at the idea of meeting men my age. Not at all! [...] But, on dating websites, when I see men – even in my age group – that look LIKE MY DAD (emphasis). I'm like... uhhh, no way! [...] You know, the guy writes he is 59 years old but he looks 75! What do you want me to do with that (small laugh)? I can't deal with that, personally! I look younger, he looks older. It doesn't work, you know!
(Béatrice, 56-year-old, mother, divorced)*

Like many other women her age, 52-year-old Iris argued that she was not searching for younger men per se, but that she ended up with younger men in large parts because many men her age were not trying to make themselves appealing options. In her experience, men her age or older were often quite resentful from their previous intimate relationships and gave off a negative vibe, they lacked energy, and they did not spend much energy on trying to maintain a pleasing physical appearance. Therefore, the options that made the most sense to her were younger men, more specifically men in their 30s or early 40s.

It's not necessarily that I'm "looking" for younger men. I'm looking for someone I have a connection with. It just happens to be 40-year-old guys. It's not because I'm looking for someone younger. But, older guys, I don't find that connection. I can't explain it... it's really the energy! The energy is not the same. And it's more than that. There's something else... they're cuter, first of all. I don't find men my age to be cute. And they have this sort of angry energy. I don't know how to explain it differently. They really give off anger.

(Iris, 52-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

Overall, compared to women over 40, those in their 30s generally painted a much more positive portrait of the options they could find in their age range on the dating market. In fact, most women in their 40s and 50s seemed to be quite disappointed with the single men in their age bracket or older. Furthermore, many women over 40 described men in their age bracket as discriminating against women of a similar-age. Therefore, most women in their 40s and 50s perceived themselves as having been somewhat indirectly pushed towards younger men by men their age.

“I don’t have the body of a 20-year-old”: The effect of ageist conceptions of women’s worth on women’s dating behavior

While most women in their 40s and 50s insisted that there were a high number of younger men pursuing older women, they were not immune to the cultural representation of women’s value on the dating market as declining with age. In fact, such negative assumptions about the depreciating effect of aging on women often affected their desire to approach younger men they found interesting and/or to accept younger men’s propositions. Indeed, most women over 40 mentioned at some point during their interview how surprised they were to see that so many younger men were attracted to them. Reflecting on their first experiences with age-hypogamous intimate relationships, many women in their 40s and 50s explained how they could not believe that younger men were truly attracted to them at first.

For instance, until last year, 57-year-old Naomie had only dated older men. When she and her 70-year-old spouse separated less than a year ago, she was initially certain that she would never be able to find a man again, considering her age. After a few months of feeling depressed and discouraged, she decided to join a dating website with hopes of meeting interesting men in her age-bracket. New to the world of dating websites, she was quite surprised to see how many younger men were interested in older women and approached her. Naomie explained that at first, she could not understand why younger men were approaching her. Feeling insecure about her physical appearance and her ability to physically attract younger men, she needed reassurance from them with regards to their attraction to women whose bodies showed clear signs of aging. Describing her first interactions with Jesse, a 38-year-old man online, she said:

At the beginning, I was apprehensive. At the start, I was telling myself “This can’t be real!” My first reaction was [telling him] “You know you are dealing with a woman that has had 3 kids, that is 56 years old? Listen, I don’t have the body of a 20-year-old”. It was really one of my concerns, you know. And the reply I would get is “Certainly, I know that. Otherwise, I’d be with a 20-year-old girl. It’s normal. I want a real woman, a mature woman”.
(Naomie, 57-year-old, mother, divorced)

For many participants in their 40s and 50s, letting younger men make the first moves as a way for them to confirm those prospective partners were *really* interested in older women. Indeed, many women expressed reluctance towards approaching younger men they found attractive, and talked about waiting for younger men to approach them as a strategy to avoid the (perceived) high risk of rejection in light of their age. For instance, 43-year-old Yvonne had had several age-hypogamous intimate relationships over the years, some more serious than others. Despite her many experiences with younger men, Yvonne mentioned that she was not confident enough to

approach younger men who had caught her eye, because she was convinced that she was physically less attractive than young women. Waiting for younger men to court her was a safer approach in her mind:

I'm not someone that will go up to younger men, because... I have to say I'm conscious that I'm not... [...] I look around me, young girls, and then I'm like, you know, they're really in shape. Their skin isn't damaged. I'm conscious of my age. And I'm stunned that I get approached, when there are young girls all around me who are, in my opinion, a lot prettier.
(Yvonne, 43-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)

From more than 25 years, Xana was married to a man four years older than her. When she became single again at age 50, she was initially quite depressed and thought that she would never be able to meet an interesting man again, because of her age. When she met 25-year-old Andreas, a tourist visiting Montreal for a week, Xana initially did not imagine that there could be anything more than a platonic relationship between them, because she believed it was impossible for younger men to find women her age attractive. Telling the story of how her short-term fling with 25-year-old Andreas began, she explained that he managed to convince her to sleep with him after a few days of courting her through thoughtful, romantic gestures:

I had no idea [that something would happen]. I was completely naïve, you know. I had no intention of seducing him. I didn't see him like a potential sex partner at all, because my feeling is young men aren't interested in older women because we have a body that's... We aren't as youthful and all. And that guy, at some point [...] the second evening, he cooks me a nice dinner: candles, wine, dessert. And then, he offers me another massage. He puts on romantic music. And then I said "What the hell! Why not!" And that's how it started.
(Xana, 54-year-old, mother, divorced)

Overall, letting younger men approach them, and expecting younger men to dedicate a lot of energy into trying to seduce them was often a way for many women over 40 to be reassured that younger men were truly interested in older women and to reduce the risk of feeling inadequate, disappointed, or rejected once on a date with them. One should note that many women over 40 also thought that some of the younger men approaching older women might be being ill-intentioned and might “use” them for sexual purposes without any considerations for women’s feelings and expectations (see chapter 4 for further discussion). In other words, playing a more passive role and letting younger men seduce them was often a way for many women in their 40s and 50s to assess younger men’s intentions and expectations, and confirm that these younger men would make them feel appreciated and desirable if they were to become their intimate partners.

Resisting potential accusations of deviant behavior

During their interviews, most women in this study mentioned how society was much more disapproving of age-hypogamous intimate relationships than relationships where the man is older, and most women were annoyed with the common assumptions attached to the ‘cougar’ label. The majority of participants reported having themselves experienced some teasing or criticism because of their involvement in age-hypogamous intimate relationships. For instance, several participants reported that some people had tried to discourage them from dating younger men using various arguments intended to scare them, such as mentioning that age-hypogamous intimate relationships never work and that women always end up hurt. Other participants reported that some people in their circle mentioned that there must be something wrong with women who choose men “who are young enough to be their son”, or that women who date younger men are probably too immature to date men their age.

While many women mentioned not being offended by the jokes or negative comments people could make about their dating choices, others — especially women in their 40s and 50s — reported being at times insulted or bothered by people criticizing or making fun of their interest for younger men, even when the comments came from other loved ones. In fact, compared to women in their 30s, women in their 40s and 50s seemed to be more affected by negative or humorous comments people around them could make. For instance, 46-year-old Laurie mentioned that some of the women she knew had been quite judgmental of her age-hypogamous intimate relationships. When confronted with those friend's negative reactions, she tended to get defensive and to confront them:

What pisses me off is when it's women who make judgmental comments. I tell myself "You're are so not helping women's fight for equality!" [...] Sometimes, I tell them "You don't know what you're missing! You are letting your life pass you by, girls". You know, those women prefer not to have anyone with whom they could have sex, instead of going out with a younger man. [I tell them], "Look, what's your plan? You won't have sex for 10 years? Or you'll go out with men you find ugly, just because you can't imagine your partner to be younger than you?! You're the one who has a problem, girl!"

(Laurie, 46-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

In many instances, portraying younger men as the ones actively pursuing older women appeared to be a way for many women over 40 to neutralize the stigma attached to their unconventional partner choices. Indeed, compared to 30-something women, women in their 40s and 50s were much more likely to respond to perceived criticism by emphasizing how it was in fact younger men who chased older women. For instance, in the last decade, 43-year-old Whitney had had several younger intimate partners, most of which were 8 to 13 years younger than her. She reported that her friends often teased her, calling her 'cougar' and making fun of her choice of partners.

Annoyed with the comparison, she would often get defensive and reply that it was in fact younger men who were chasing her:

It's starting to get annoying, that whole 'cougar' story. I find it pejorative, negative. And sometimes I get teased with that – because it's happened among my circle of close friends – and I keep repeating: "No, no!" I say, "They're the ones chasing the cougar". Because the cougar, she doesn't exist (little laugh). You know, it's true that I'm not the one running after these younger guys.

(Whitney, 43-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

During her interview, 52-year-old Tania revealed that she had had two intimate relationships with younger men in her life. The first one — a six-month long fling with her younger brother's childhood friend, a man 12 years younger than her — happened roughly 12 years ago. The second one was a three-year, serious relationship with Daniel, a man 21 years her junior who she dated until two years ago. Like many other participants her age, Tania felt that some people around her imagined her as a highly sexual woman because she had experiences with dating men who were much younger than her, which made her quite uncomfortable. When people insinuated that she must have a particularly strong sexual appetite for a woman her age, she would defend herself by saying that she never actively sought younger male partners:

[It makes me feel like] I am a man eater. Maybe it's in the way they say it. You know, they're like "Ooooooh yeah?", using a sexual tone, So you like younger men, eh?" (seductive tone). I say to them "Well, I didn't choose to go out with a younger man. It just happened like that. I was never into younger men. It just happened" [...] Obviously, I don't like hearing the word 'cougar'. I don't perceive myself as one, so when people tell me I am a cougar, I'm like "Uuh, no! [...] I don't chase younger men".

(Tania, 52-year-old, no children, divorced)

Rejecting the common perception of women in age-hypogamous intimate relationships as the ones who pursued their younger partners was also often a way for many women over 40 to resist being read as sexual deviants corrupting younger men. Indeed, many participants in their 40s and 50s perceived the ‘cougar’ stereotype as suggesting that older women were taking helpless men down the path of deviance and that men were unaccountable for their own actions. Some interpreted the cultural representation of ‘cougars’ as suggesting that it was impossible younger men could desire older women and purposely seek age-hypogamous intimate relationships, and that younger men must have been somewhat manipulated in order to accept to date an older woman. For instance, Xana, a 54-year-old mother who had many casual intimate relationships with men in their 20s and 30s in the last two years, said:

There are a lot of guys who fantasize about older women. It’s because they know they will get an experience that is more – I don’t know how to say it – more exciting, or, you know. And they are adults, they know what they are doing when they ‘like’ me on Tinder. They aren’t victims, they aren’t prey, and we aren’t the mean witches perverting them [...] No, no, no! That’s not how it works. It’s really... they really want this.

(Xana, 54-year-old, mother, divorced)

On the other hand, it appeared that women in their 30s were somewhat protected against the stigma associated with age-hypogamous intimate relationships by their relative youth. More specifically, I argue that because women’s sexuality is culturally depicted as more acceptable for young and attractive women, women were less likely to be negatively affected by judgmental comments or teasing. In fact, while many participants in their 30s mentioned how dating a younger man meant

risking being read as a “dirty-minded older lady”¹⁸, most of them perceived the risk to be much higher for older women than for women their age. Indeed, women in their 30s felt somewhat protected from accusations of deviant sexual desires because of their relative young age.

For instance, while she had been teased before by friends who called her ‘cougar’— because of her recent three-year relationship with 23-year-old Brandon— 32-year-old Becky reported perceiving these comments as friendly jokes. She explained that because she was only in her 30s, and because she was in a serious relationship with her younger partner, she did not feel targeted by negative assumptions related to ‘cougars’. Comparing herself to her older female acquaintances who also had experiences with age-hypogamous intimate relationships, Becky noticed that older women were more bothered than her by the cultural representations of ‘cougars’, and that they experienced more negative reactions than her when labeled that way:

When I talk about “cougars” with women in their 40s or older, I realize that dating younger men is much more difficult for them than it is for me. I mean that the negative stereotype is mostly targeting older women, let’s say those over 40. Whether it’s just their perceptions, or whether others actually judge them [I can’t tell]. As for me, I never experienced pressure or prejudice against me or my relationship.

(Becky, 32-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

If younger participants could easily shut down accusations of potential deviant sexual desires and practices by arguing that they were too young to be “real cougars”, one could detect in women’s discourse anxiety regarding the social cost of aging for women in terms of their ability to present

¹⁸ In French, “vieille matante cochone” is a common derogatory expression used to refer to older women who ‘dare’ to present themselves as sexual beings. Many of the participants in their 30s used that expression when describing how women in their 40s or 50s dating younger men were often perceived.

themselves as sexual beings and date younger men freely. For instance, 36-year-old Uma's first age-hypogamous intimate relationship was with ex-boyfriend Petrov, a man seven years her junior who she dated for four months while she was working abroad a few years ago. Since then, she found herself being mostly attracted to men in their early to mid-20s. While she was comfortable with her current preference for younger partners, she admitted feeling somewhat fearful of what people would think of her in a few years if she did not change her habit of dating younger men. Reflecting on how all of her recent intimate partners were all in their early-to-late twenties, she expressed some concerns about her stronger physical attraction for younger men and how she might eventually be read as "creepy" or "dirty-minded":

I have to admit, yeah, I often find younger men more attractive than men my age or older. And that worries me. I don't find it ok (small laugh) [...] I tell myself that I won't be young forever. And it will become kinda creepy one day if I don't change my perspective (laugh).
(Uma, 36-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Conclusion

Overall, unlike the cultural representation of 'cougars' found in the media, very few women depicted themselves as confident seductresses who pursue younger men, with younger men being passive prey. Indeed, very few women I interviewed completely rejected the traditional dating script during the relationship formation process. The tendency among women in this study to depict themselves as having played a rather passive role in the relationship formation process was, however, much more pronounced among those in their 40s and 50s than it was among women in their 30s. The majority of women over 40 (but very few women in their 30s) depicted younger men as the ones pursuing older women, and many presented themselves as having resisted for a while before finally accepting a younger man's proposition. Most women in their 40s and 50s also

often depicted men their age as indirectly pushing them towards younger men. Compared to older participants, women in their 30s played a more active role in the relationship formation process with younger men, though their attempts to push the boundaries of acceptable behavior for women usually appeared to stop at participating *as much* as their younger partners in communicating their interest.

There are a few ways one could interpret these results. It is possible that younger participants' greater ease with playing a (somewhat) active role in communicating their interest and steering the relationship in the desired direction is a sign that attitudes regarding appropriate female behavior during relationship formation are changing among the younger generation of women. Considering that women's sexuality is less socially restricted than it was just generation ago (Allyn, 2000; Jonason & Marks, 2009; Kamen, 2000; Lévy, 2008a; Paynter & Leaper, 2016; Reid et al., 2011), one could interpret these findings as reflecting generational differences in what is considered appropriate dating behavior for men and women. In other words, younger women might be more likely than older women to consider appropriate for women to approach and seduce men they find interesting and to actually do so.

However, one should also consider the current cultural climate in which women's experiences and discourses take place, more specifically our society's tendency to equate women's value as intimate partners with their youth and physical appearance. Indeed, I argue that the tendency among women over 40 to let younger men approach and seduce them was influenced by women's internalized conceptions of older women's value on the dating market. As the results presented here showed, women in their 40s and 50s were often doubtful that younger men could truly be interested in them, a feeling very few women in their 30s expressed. Therefore, many were reluctant to approach younger men they found attractive, and many were suspicious at first when

younger prospective partners approached them. These women feared that they could be rejected or that they could feel physically unattractive in the arms of younger men. Compared to younger participants, women in their 40s and 50s perceived approaching younger men and leading the relationship formation process as a much riskier endeavor.

Furthermore, by insisting that it is actually younger men who chase older women, women in their 40s and 50s partially disrupted the societal discourse presenting older women as less valuable than younger women. Indeed, by depicting the dating market as filled with younger men actively seeking older women, the women over 40 in this study challenged the idea that aging has a depreciating effect on women's value as intimate partners. In addition, by arguing that single men their age were often not desirable options, they also challenged the gendered double standard of aging indicating that aging in women has a stronger value depreciation effect than it does in men. I argue that those two discourses combined also allowed women to challenge the sexist and ageist conceptions of older women's value on the dating market, and to reposition themselves as desirable partners in the eyes of others.

It would also be impossible to understand these results without addressing the risk of stigmatization women face for dating younger men and how that risk might be perceived differently depending on the woman's age. While the taboo surrounding age-hypogamous intimate relationships technically applies to women of all ages, the image that usually attracts negative reactions or humorous comments in the media is generally one of a woman in her 40s and 50s (Aoun, 2013; Collard, 2012; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014). The cultural fascination with 'cougars', I contend, is not solely the result of a taboo against age-hypogamous intimate relationships, but also a reflection of the cultural discomfort towards *older* women presenting themselves as highly desiring.

Based on participants' stories, it was clear that women in their 40s and 50s were more afraid than younger participants of being criticized for dating younger men, and that it affected their ability and/or desire to approach younger men and try to seduce them. I argue since the risk of stigmatization for presenting oneself as highly desiring increases with age for women, presenting themselves as having played a rather passive role in the relationship formation process also served as a stigma management strategy, allowing women over 40 to neutralize potential accusations of sexual deviance that can come with dating younger men.

First, by presenting the relationship formation process as something that was out of their control and/or by depicting younger men as the ones who actively pursued them, these women re-inscribed their behavior within the confine of traditionally acceptable female behavior which allowed them to neutralize potential accusations of deviant behavior. Indeed, considering how initiating and leading the courtship process is still strongly associated with masculinity, and how women are encouraged to find validation in being chosen by men (Eaton & Rose, 2011; England et al., 2008; Kurth et al., 2000; Lamont, 2014; Laner & Ventrone, 1998, 2000), depicting themselves in a way that conforms (to some degree — as I will discuss in chapter 4) to traditional definitions of femininity allowed women to challenge the idea that they are deviant, and allowed them to justify their relationships.

Second, I suggest that through their discourses, women in their 40s and 50s were also trying to neutralize the stigma attached to their unconventional dating choices by deflecting the responsibility for the development of their relationships onto something out of their control (i.e. coincidence) or someone else (i.e. younger men; men their age), which are common “techniques of neutralization” (Sykes & Matza, 1957). In fact, while there is no reason to doubt women's descriptions of their experiences of dating men their age or older, it often seemed like women were

trying to deflect the responsibility of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships on men their age as a way for them to manage the potential criticism they might face. Pointing to how men their age preferred younger women and describing single men their age who approached them as undesirable options often seemed to be strategies women used to justify their unconventional dating choices without taking much responsibility for them.

Third, by depicting younger men as the ones pursuing older women, the participants in this study argued against the potential perception of younger men as victims of older women, further neutralizing stigma. Indeed, one of the ways through which individuals engaged in deviant behavior can neutralize negative interpretations of themselves is by denying that anyone suffers from their behavior — that is, showing that there are no victims (Costello, 2000; Sykes & Matza, 1957). In many cases, women's insistence on younger men's active role in initiating age-hypogamous intimate relationships was a way for them to argue against the interpretation of women interested in younger men as somewhat predatory and against the perception of younger men as victims of older women's (perceived) perverse desires.

In the next chapter, I explore the ways women talk about sex with younger men, and how it compares to sex with men their age or older. Precisely, I explore women's accounts of the sexual interplay in age-hypogamous intimate relationships with the intent of understanding how choosing younger men relates to women's desire and ability to reproduce/disrupt the long-standing traditional culture-level sexual script. I show that when it comes to sex, the women in this study were not afraid to challenge gendered expectations regarding appropriate sexual behavior for women and presented themselves as sexually liberated women. I elaborate on the reasons why younger men were perceived as the best option for sexually empowered women like themselves.

CHAPTER 4 — DESIRE AND PLEASURE: WOMEN’S SEXUALITY IN AGE-HYPOGAMOUS INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Women and men face very different realities with regards to how desiring they are expected to be, when it is deemed appropriate for them to have sex, and how they should behave during sex. Influenced by the widespread, longstanding assumption that men — unlike women — have strong libidos and ‘uncontrollable’ sexual impulses (Donat & White, 2000; Morokoff, 2000), the script for (heterosexual) sex that has dominated the cultural landscape in North America over the past century encourages men to think of themselves as sexual subjects entitled to feel sexual desires and entitled to act on them, while encouraging women to think of themselves as sexual objects (Kurth et al., 2000). Women have traditionally been discouraged from being too assertive (Kurth et al., 2000; Morokoff, 2000) — that is, expressing their own sexual desires, initiating desired sexual behavior with a partner, refusing unwanted sexual gestures, and communicating their sexual history (Brassard, Dupuy, Bergeron, & Shaver, 2015; Loshek & Terrell, 2015; Morokoff, 2000). In line with the widespread belief that men have stronger sexual needs than women, women have been expected to find satisfaction in being the passive recipient of male sexual desire (Fahs, 2011; Kurth et al., 2000; Lang et al., 2011; Smolak et al., 2014; Travis et al., 2000); indeed, the male orgasm has also traditionally been depicted as the ultimate goal of hetero sex (Fahs, 2011; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014).

There are clear indications that the longstanding culture-level sexual script has lost some of its power over women over the last 60 years, as women have pushed back and re-negotiated the boundaries of acceptable female sexual behavior (Allyn, 2000; Kamen, 2000; Lévy, 2008a; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). This has been influenced in part by women’s increasing financial independence (Belleau, 2011; Coontz, 2015; Mundy, 2012), legal reforms (Charton,

2008; Duffy & Cohen, 2001), reproductive technologies (Allyn, 2000; Belleau, 2004; Lévy, 2008b), changing gender ideologies (Allyn, 2000; Gerson, 2010; Kamen, 2000), and shifts in norms and attitudes regarding sexuality (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Allyn, 2000; Corriveau, 2008; Kamen, 2000; Lévy, 2008a). Through their discourses and behavior, many women have been challenging the idea that only men are desiring and entitled to act on their sexual desires. For instance, many studies show that there has been an increasing acceptance and practice of hookups — that is, “casual sexual contact between nondating partners without an (expressed or acknowledged) expectation of forming a committed relationship” (Heldman & Wade, 2010, p. 324) — for young women (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2015; Backstrom, Armstrong, & Puentes, 2012; Bogle, 2008; England et al., 2008; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Kahn, Kahn, & Saville, 2010; Reid et al., 2011; Wade & Hedman, 2012).

Furthermore, a considerable portion of women now report initiating sex instead of passively waiting for men’s propositions (Kamen, 2000). Other studies also highlight that today’s women are more assertive than women from previous generations when it comes to having their sexual pleasure attended to (Kamen, 2000; Lafrance, Stelzl, & Bullock, 2017). Finally, it is worth noting that there have also been many collective efforts of resistance led by women that were intended to criticize and fight the sexual double standards, as well as sexual violence against women. Women’s marches such as “Slut Walks”¹⁹ or “Take Back the Night”²⁰ are well-known examples of contemporary feminist protests aimed at promoting gender equality in the realm of sexuality.

¹⁹ “Slut Walks” began in 2011 in Canada. The objective of this demonstrations was to protest against “slut shaming”, and the common societal tendency to blame women for the sexual victimization they face (Cooper, 2017; Reger, 2015).

²⁰ “Take Back the Night” walks began in the 1970s, and are now a global phenomenon. Once a year, thousands of women around the world protest against sexual assaults on women and society’s tendency to blame the victim by taking the streets at night (Kretschmer & Barber, 2016).

While recent research on the way individuals perform sex in the heterosexual context shows a certain level of departure from the traditional culture-level sexual script, it also indicates that women are not entirely liberated from the cultural imperative to present themselves as less desiring and less sexually assertive than men. For instance, while both young women and men are encouraged to partake in the “hookup culture”, research shows that young women are more likely than young men to be pejoratively labeled or negatively judged for doing so (England et al., 2008; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Jonason, 2007; Jonason & Fisher, 2009; Jonason & Marks, 2009; Lai & Hynie, 2011; Reid et al., 2011). Men, on the other hand, are still much more likely than women to gain social status for accumulating sexual conquests (Jonason, 2007; Jonason & Fisher, 2009).

Moreover, while there is increasing acceptance of female bisexuality, and young women are often encouraged to engage in bisexual behavior (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Fahs, 2009), women are also more likely than young men to be viewed in a negative way for engaging in unconventional sexual practices such as “ménage-à-trois” (Jonason & Marks, 2009) or more likely to be accused of performing bisexuality solely with the intention of increasing their desirability in the eyes of men (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013). Therefore, today’s young women find themselves in a “Catch-22”; while they are encouraged to present themselves as sexy, sexually active, and sexually open-minded, they are also always at risk of being criticized for being *too* sexual and at risk of being “slut-shamed” (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Pickel & Gentry, 2017; Tanenbaum, 2015).

The gendered prescriptions for appropriate sexual behavior found in the traditional culture-level sexual script have important consequences for women’s ability to enjoy themselves during sex. For instance, contemporary research on young adults’ experiences of (heterosexual) sex show that women are less likely than men to receive oral sex during the sexual interaction (Armstrong et al.,

2015; Backstrom et al., 2012; Lewis & Marston, 2016), and that they are less likely than men to experience an orgasm during sex, especially in the context of casual sex (Armstrong et al., 2015; Richters, de Visser, Rissel, & Smith, 2006). In fact, most young women believe that in a casual sexual encounter, men care little about female orgasm (Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). Many young women also feel pressured to perform sex in a way that is intended to increase men's sexual attraction to them and to emphasize *men's* sexual pleasure (Fahs, 2011). In fact, there is also evidence that many women fake their orgasm during sex, as they see preserving their partner's sense of masculinity as more important than truly experiencing sexual bliss (Fahs, 2011; LaFrance et al., 2017; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014).

One should note that while there has been considerable effort dedicated to understanding the sexual dynamics between heterosexual young adults, there are relatively few studies focusing specifically on middle-aged women's sexuality outside sexual health studies (Gannon, 1999; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014; Rostosky & Travis, 2000; Sassler, 2010). Therefore, there is little scholarship dedicated to understanding how aging in women affect their ability to re-negotiate the boundaries of acceptable sexual desire and behavior in the context of (heterosexual) sex.

We do know that the cultural imperative for women to equate their value as intimate partners with their youth and physical appearance can affect women's sexuality in a negative way (Koch et al., 2005; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013; Travis et al., 2000; Wolf, 1991). For instance, in their study on the influence middle-aged women's perception of their own physical attractiveness on their sexuality, Koch et al. (2005) found that the more a woman perceived herself as less attractive compared to her younger years, the more likely she was to report a decline in sexual desire or frequency of sexual activity compared to her younger years.

There is also evidence that older women's sexuality can be complicated by the cultural opposition between motherhood and sexuality (Friedman et al., 1998; Montemurro & Siefken, 2012; Trice-Black, 2010). Indeed, studies show that when they become mothers, women are generally expected to avoid dressing up in a way that would be considered too 'sexy' and/or presenting themselves as too sexually active, unless they are in a private context (Friedman et al., 1998; Montemurro & Siefken, 2012). However, alongside the strong societal tendency to depict female sexuality as more socially acceptable for young, attractive, and childless women, one can also find increasing cultural discourses encouraging middle-aged women to present themselves as sexual beings (Andrews, 2003; Lavigne et al., 2013; Tally, 2006; Weitz, 2010), and encouraging the sexualization of older women and/or mothers, especially in certain niches of pornography (Huntley, 2000; Musial, 2014; Vannier et al., 2014).

Aging also affects women's experiences of (heterosexual) sex, in part, because older men are more likely than young men to experience male sexual dysfunction (Cameron & Tomlin, 2007; Chevret, Jaudinot, Sullivan, Marrel, & De Gendre, 2004; Laumann, Paik, & Rosen, 1999; Rosen et al., 2004). Considering that penile-vaginal intercourse is generally considered the most important part of the (hetero) sexual interaction (Fahs, 2011; Fishman & Mamo, 2001; Koedt, 1973; Vares, Potts, Gavey, & M. Grace, 2007), many women report that their partners' erectile dysfunction has a negative impact on their sexual satisfaction (Cameron & Tomlin, 2007; Chevret et al., 2004). The treatment of erectile dysfunction through sexual enhancement drugs, such as Viagra, tends to positively impact the sexual satisfaction of women (Çayan, Bozlu, Canpolat, & Akbay, 2004; Chevret et al., 2004; Vares et al., 2007). Nonetheless, one should note that not all women are happy to see penile-vaginal intercourse being reintroduced into their sex life once their partner starts

using sexual enhancement drugs (Potts, Gavey, Grace, & Vares, 2003; Vares et al., 2007), as penile-vaginal sex is not always a woman's favorite sexual activity (Rostosky & Travis, 2000).

Based on the common cultural representation of 'cougars' as highly desiring and sexually assertive women, one should expect women in age-hypogamous intimate relationships to resist traditional expectations of sexual passivity for women (Aoun, 2013; Barrett & Levin, 2014; Collard, 2012; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014). In fact, Aoun (2013)'s analysis of the way women presented themselves on Facebook pages dedicated to 'cougars' or 'MILFs' revealed that these women both destabilized and reproduced certain aspects of gendered assumptions regarding women's sexuality and value as intimate partners. On the one hand, she found that these women tended to present themselves as sexually active, highly desiring, and desirable. On the other hand, they also insisted on their youthful physical appearance as a trait to be celebrated, and they put forward their physical appearance and sexuality as ways to attract men, therefore reifying the traditional notions of women's worth as intimate partners.

While we have an idea of the way women openly seeking younger male partners present themselves on Facebook pages dedicated to 'cougars' or 'MILFs', no research so far has been conducted on the sexual dynamics within age-hypogamous intimate relationships. It is unclear whether older women who choose younger sex partners actually challenge traditional gender norms regarding sexuality in their interactions with men. In fact, it is unclear whether being with a younger man influences the way women perform sex, and whether it influences their conformity/resistance to the traditional culture-level sexual script.

In this chapter, I explore women's accounts of the sexual interplay in age-hypogamous intimate relationships with the intent of understanding how choosing younger men relates to women's

desire and ability to reproduce/disrupt the long-standing traditional culture-level sexual script. First, I found that most women reported feeling like many younger men fantasized about older women. Furthermore, roughly half of the women in their 40s and two thirds of women in their 50s (but very few women in their 30s) reported feeling fetishized by younger men and believed that many younger men approached them specifically with the intent of fulfilling a fantasy. While most of them enjoyed thinking that younger men fantasized about them, they also often mentioned that they had to be somewhat cautious when selecting whose propositions to accept in order to avoid younger men who were trying to “use” women solely to fulfill their fantasy, without any consideration for women’s desires or expectations.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of women in this study, regardless of their age, described the sexual dynamics they had experienced with younger men in a positive light. Indeed, they depicted age-hypogamous intimate relationships as a context in which women were not only allowed to disrupt some facets of the longstanding culture-level script for (heterosexual) sex, but also celebrated by younger men for doing so. Compared to their experience of sex with men their age or older, women described age-hypogamous intimate relationships as a context in which they could more easily: (a) present themselves as having a strong sex drive and act on it, (b) be sexually assertive in bed, and/or (c) ensure that their pleasure be attended to.

Based on women’s accounts of their experiences, I argue that in the context of age-hypogamous intimate relationships women (and younger men) can more easily perform sex in a way that departs, to some extent, from the traditional culture-level script for (heterosexual) sex because: 1) women perceive younger men to be purposely seeking older, confident, sexually experienced women; 2) women’s perceptions of younger men fantasizing about older women shift the gender

power dynamic at play during sex; and 3) younger men's stamina facilitates women's ability to express their sexual desires and act on them.

‘MILFs’ and ‘cougars’: Women feeling fetishized (or not)

During their interviews, most women in this study mentioned how there were younger men who fantasized about sleeping with older women. According to them, many younger men equated older women with sexually experienced women, and/or as women with a particularly vibrant sex drive in search of sex partners who could satisfy their needs. Many women perceived younger men's interest in older women as triggered by recent²¹ cultural representations of ‘cougars’ and ‘MILFs’ found in the media. Many participants talked about the sexualization of older women found in popular movies or certain types of pornographic videos as influencing younger men's perception of older women, and creating a certain curiosity or sexual attraction among younger men towards age-hypogamous sex. Others felt that the increased amount of cultural representations of age-hypogamous intimate relationships normalized such fantasy for men, and provided those who were already interested in older women with a certain sense of legitimacy and courage to act on their desires.

With that in mind, a vast proportion of women in their 40s and 50s felt that many younger men — mostly those in their 20s or early thirties — were approaching them *specifically* because they were hoping to fulfill a fantasy, that of sleeping with a ‘MILF’, a ‘cougar’ or a sexually experienced woman. Like many women her age, 49-year-old Jasmine told me during her interview how common it was for older women to receive messages from men in their 20s and 30s on dating

²¹ One can find cultural representations of older women as sexually experienced women young men can fantasize about before the recent media interest for ‘cougars’, for instance in movies such as *The Graduate* (1967) or *My Tutor* (1983). Nonetheless, compared to previous decades, there has been more depictions of age-hypogamous intimate relationships in the media in the last 20 years (Lawton & Callister, 2010).

websites. She talked about the sexualization of older women found in the media as influencing younger men's fantasies. Precisely, she explained the abundance of messages from younger men she had received on dating websites by pointing to the 'MILF' genre commonly found on pornography websites:

They just want to get laid. [...] I'm sure there's enough MILF porn out there that it turns them on. I don't know, why am I getting so lucky? I cannot tell you, I am not a supermodel. Totally not! But they don't seem to mind.
(Jasmine, 49-year-old, mother, separated)

One should note that most of the women over 40 who participated in this study reported being approached by younger men mostly through dating websites or applications. Women over 40 provided many examples of how a considerable number of younger men were looking specifically for older female partners on dating websites or applications and how a woman's age was an important selection criterion for those younger men. For instance, during her interview, 48-year-old Joanna explained that she had decided to lie about her age on her online dating profile — taking off six years of her true age — in order to attract a higher number of men. She initially thought that revealing her real age would dissuade younger men from pursuing a conversation with her. However, when she would inform younger men that she was older than what her profile indicated, many of them expressed even more interest in meeting her. She interpreted this as a proof that some younger are looking specifically for an age-hypogamous intimate relationship, and that some are aroused by the age difference in itself:

Listen, young guys in their 20s, it's as if they are the ones who are the most interested in older women. It's unbelievable! [...] It's crazy! I've gotten so many invites! [...] And I put a younger age on my profile; I cheat, I'm actually 48. I think I wrote that I am 42 years old [...]. But I say to them "listen, I'm not 42, I'm 48" to try to dissuade them, you know. And then they are like "My God! Even better!" (enthusiastic tone)
(Joanna, 48-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

Most women over 40 were generally not bothered by the thought of being a younger man's fantasy. Many actually seemed to enjoy thinking they were a source of fantasy for younger men. However, many women in their 40s and 50s also felt that because of the pornographic videos or other recent cultural representations of 'cougars' or 'MILFs', they were particularly at risk of being targeted by men in their 20s and early 30s with purely sexually-motivated intentions. Many felt that some of these younger men did not have the best intentions, and they believed there was a risk they could be "used" by younger men who were solely trying to fulfil the fantasy of sleeping with an older woman without any respect for the woman's feelings and expectations. Therefore, many participants over 40 felt they had to carefully filter younger men's messages online in order to avoid those who were clearly objectifying older women and who were not truly interested in getting to know them. Many would discard younger men who seemed to have dedicated little effort into their messages. Others would reject younger men's propositions when they perceived men's messages to be vulgar or too sexually-motivated.

The (perceived) fetishization of older women complicated the ability of women over 40 to determine their sex partners' motivations. For instance, 43-year-old Caroline was hoping to find a casual yet monogamous relationship, ideally with a younger man. While she enjoyed the attention she was getting from younger men on the Facebook group dedicated to 'cougars' that she was part

of, she wondered, somewhat anxiously, whether some of these men were approaching her with the hopes of checking off an item on their bucket list of sexual experiences to try:

I ask myself, if at the end of the day it's just a fantasy they want to check-off. "Well, I slept with a woman 18 years older than me yesterday! Yes! Put that in the calendar, in my list of accomplishments."

(Caroline, 43-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)

Like other participants her age, Whitney expressed mixed feelings with regards to younger men's (perceived) sexual fetish for older women. As discussed previously, the 43-year-old woman had had several age-hypogamous intimate relationships in the last decade. She mentioned during her interview how she had fallen in love with some of her younger partners and found herself quite hurt when the relationship came to an end. At the time of the interview, Whitney was experiencing difficulties with her 31-year-old partner, and she was quite disillusioned with regards to the longevity potential of age-hypogamous intimate relationships. She thought that while casual sex with younger men was pleasant for both partners involved, in the long run, women were at a higher risk of getting hurt since she perceived younger men as rarely wanting more than fun sexual experiences:

Whitney: Women are super beautiful in their 40s now, really! So, I understand why the guys are attracted. But, I think that us women in our 40s, we need to watch out, because of the sexualization of women in our society now, we could be used. It's fun, yes, but we need to be careful, you know.

Interviewer: What do you mean by "you can be used"?

Whitney: Well, the guys are just having fun, and for us women, you know, yes we can have lovers, but we are always looking for love at the end of the day.

(Whitney, 43-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

In sharp contrast with women in their 40s and 50s, very few women in their 30s believed that younger men approached them with the intent of fulfilling a ‘MILF’ or ‘cougar’ fantasy. Many explained that most often, when they met younger men for the first time, those men thought they were talking to a woman their age. Unlike women in their 40s and 50s, most women in their 30s who participated in this study reported having met some or all of their younger partners in real-life contexts, not on dating websites or applications where one’s age is clearly indicated on individual profiles. Louise, a 32-year-old woman, reported having had mostly younger intimate partners since she became single again two years ago. She described her experiences of meeting younger men:

*It’s what has been happening to me the last few years, since I’ve been single – It’s been about two years, I wrote it down – I systematically attract younger guys. [...] Between 25 and 35 years old, it’s like we’re at stage where we look ‘ageless’, you know. It doesn’t show much yet in the face that we’re over 30 years old, so often 24-25 year-old guys will approach you without knowing how old you are, thinking you are about their age. But that’s just not the case.
(Louise, 32-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)*

Because most of the women in their 30s believed they were often read as 20-something women, many did not think that their younger partners were searching for older women per se when they met. Reflecting on why she attracted younger men, 30-year-old Jackie explained that in the context of bars, younger men were under the impression, based on her physical appearance, that she was their age. Like most women in their 30s, she never felt like she was targeted by younger men looking for an experience with an older woman:

I keep getting told that I don't look my age. [...] When I tell younger guys that I'm 30, they don't believe me. When they come up to me, they don't think they are talking to an older woman. [...] You know, it might be because of the places where my friends and I hang out. You're likely to meet younger men in such places. But like I was saying, the guys don't approach us thinking we're older.
(Jackie, 30-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Throughout her adult life, 37-year-old Estelle had had several serious, committed age-hypogamous intimate relationships, most often with men who were three to five years younger than her. She reported that it was quite common for men in their 20s to approach her with romantic and/or sexual intentions. She argued that while many younger men do fantasize about older women, she personally did not look old enough to be targeted by younger men looking for that kind of experience. In fact, she thought that most often, those younger men simply thought she was their age:

The guys approach me and they're like "How old are you, 23-24?" And I'm like "37!" [...] they don't approach me thinking I'm an "experienced woman". In fact, they think I'm younger than I am.
(Estelle, 37-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Overall, the vast majority of women in this study believe that there were many men who fantasized about older women, and that the 'MILF' or 'cougar' fantasy was particularly common among men in their 20s and 30s. However, women in their 40s and 50s were much more likely than 30-something women to think that many younger men approached them specifically because they were older, because those men were hoping to fulfill a fantasy. Many women over 40 reported that they had to be relatively cautious when selecting whose propositions to accept because of the (perceived) fetishization of older women among young men. That said, as I discuss below, the vast

majority of women in this study tended to depict the sexual dynamic with younger men favorably, and described age-hypogamous intimate relationships as ideal for sexually-empowered women like themselves. Indeed, they depicted age-hypogamous intimate relationships as facilitating the disruption of certain aspects of the traditional culture-level sexual script known for constraining women's sexuality.

“I have a pretty healthy libido!”: Women presenting themselves as highly desiring

When women addressed the topic of sex, it was clear that the vast majority of them did not wish to conform to the traditional gendered (and ageist) culture-level script for heterosexual sex where women are encouraged to leave the sexual desiring to men. Indeed, during their interview, most of these women described themselves as having a strong libido, and they openly discussed how important it was for them to have sex partners who would appreciate their sexual appetite and satisfy them. They reported placing much value in having sex partners who possessed a comparably vibrant sex drive, who had the physical ability required to keep up with their sexual appetite, and who would not judge or criticize them for being desiring. Age-hypogamous intimate relationships were depicted by most women, regardless of their age, as ideal for women with strong sex drive such as themselves because younger men were perceived as having a higher sex drive than older men and/or because younger men's erectile capacities were perceived as more reliable.

First, when discussing why they had chosen younger intimate partners, many women pointed to the (perceived) higher sex drive of younger men compared to that of older men. Indeed, roughly three out of five women in their 30s and a third of women in their 40s and 50s insisted that younger men were a better match for them because they were more likely than older men to want sex as frequently as they did. Since most of these women considered themselves as having a strong sex

drive, they thought that younger men were a better match for them than men their age or older. For instance, 45-year-old Henrietta described herself as placing ample importance on having an active and fulfilling sex life, and she reported wanting a sex partner who could keep up with her strong sexual appetite. For her, choosing an older man meant that she would either have to sacrifice her sexual desires in order to respect her partner's limitations, or push him too far to the point where it could be physically dangerous for him:

*Sex is important in my life right now, I mean, I have a pretty healthy libido! I don't know, an older man? I don't want him to... I don't want to kill anybody, you know?
(Henrietta, 45-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)*

Throughout her adult life, 37-year-old Fiona had experienced both age-hypogamous and age-hypergamous intimate relationships. Currently dating 31-year-old Miguel — a man she had been dating on and off on a casual basis for the past seven years — Fiona reported preferring younger men as sex partners in part because she believed they were more likely to want sex as frequently as her. Based on her experiences of age-hypergamous intimate relationships, she said that older men tended to insinuate that wanting sex as often as she did was annoying or abnormal. When partnered with an older man, she often felt like she was left wanting more sexually. In comparing younger sex partners with older ones, she said:

*Younger men are more active, sexually. And I'm a woman who's young at heart. I don't know, I've always been attracted by men younger than me. I've dated men older than me and it just seemed like when it came to sex, it was like "Not too often", like sex with a grandpa. [...] It was worse than a frigid woman! It was once a week, they were like "Not too often", like "Don't bother me." Hey! Grandpa! No way. I can't deal with that.
(Fiona, 37-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)*

Since the women in this study perceived younger men to be more likely than older men to be as desiring as them, they viewed age-hypogamous intimate relationships as enabling them to act on their strong sex drive. For instance, until recently, 32-year-old Annabelle had always preferred older men and had never wanted to experience age-hypogamous intimate relationships. Her perception of younger men changed drastically when she met 24-year-old Frank, a man she ultimately dated for a several months last year. After that, she met another younger man, 23-year-old Sean, who she dated for roughly two months. Comparing her experiences of dating older men with those two age-hypogamous intimate relationships, she explained that on a sexual level, younger men were a much better match for her considering how frequently they wanted to have sex. Indeed, Annabelle felt that younger men were more likely to appreciate her vigorous libido and to physically keep up with her:

I have a big sexual appetite, very big. So, I might want to do it, like, eight times a day, you know. So with a man in his 40s, he will find that fun the first week, but I can tell you after the second week, he doesn't find it funny anymore (small laugh)! He will be turned off by my strong libido. But a younger man, most often, he will be able to keep up, you know.

(Annabelle, 32-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

Some participants — one out of five women, mostly women in their 30s and 40s — argued that women reached their sexual peak at a later age than men, which allowed them to reconcile their non-conformist behavior with widespread assumptions regarding men's and women's sexualities. Indeed, the idea that women reach their sexual peak at a later age than men is quite common (Barr, Bryan, & Kenrick, 2002; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014; Wiederman, 2001). Resorting to biological explanations allowed women to neutralize potential accusations of deviant sexual behavior, and to give more legitimacy to their unconventional choices of sex partners. For instance,

since her first age-hypogamous intimate relationship a few years ago, 36-year-old Uma found herself attracted mostly to younger men. Reflecting on why almost all of her recent lovers had been much younger than her, she stated:

*My sex life, it is really important to me. It always has been, but now, it's like I'm in my "peak". And you can contradict me if it isn't true, you know more about those studies than me, but being in my mid-30s, I'd say that I'm in my sexual peak. And with guys in their mid-20s, it's like we are compatible on that level. It's pure bliss, it's a good match, you know, at the moment! Maybe it will pass when I'm 40 years old, maybe I'll have a lower libido, but maybe not. I don't really know the biological cycle for women, about libido highs and lows. I often tell myself that it must be why I search for younger guys: it's a good match, cycle-wise.
(Uma, 36-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)*

Since her separation from the father of her children a few years ago, Henrietta had had two brief flings with men in their 20s. Based on those experiences, the 45-year-old mother concluded that men in their 20s were a particularly good fit for women her age. She relied on the common assumption that men reach their sexual peak much earlier than women as a way to justify her appreciation of sex with younger men.

*I'm a total atheist, but why did the Good Lord set it up this way? Why is it that men reach their sexual peak when they are young, while for the woman it's around her mid-30s? I think it is something like 19 for men and 38 for women, or something like that. [...] I'm not certain about the numbers I'm presenting, but... somewhere, there's logic in the match between the sexual peak of younger men and older women. So, from that side, maybe it makes for satisfying relationships, from a sexual standpoint.
(Henrietta, 45-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)*

One should note that while the idea that women reach their sexual peak at a later age than men is quite common (Barr et al., 2002; Wiederman, 2001), the criteria used to define it can vary from

levels of sexual desire, levels of sexual activity, levels of sexual satisfaction, or number of orgasms which complicates efforts to know when men and women reach their sexual peak — and if such peak actually exists. For instance, Barr et al. (2002) found that individuals tend to define “sexual peak” for men in terms of level of sexual desire, but usually define women’s “sexual peak” as the age when women experience the highest levels of sexual satisfaction.

However, there are several studies that show gender differences with regards to experiences of sexual desire and pleasure across the life course. For instance, back in the 1940s and 1950s, Kinsey and his colleagues (Kinsey, 1953; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1998) found that men reported the highest frequency of orgasms during their late teens, while women experienced that peak in their 30s, which led many to conclude that women experienced their sexual peak later than men (Wiederman, 2001). Using data from the nationally representative 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs), Das et al. (2012) found that among women, the likelihood of experiencing frequent (i.e. weekly) sexual thoughts peaked when they reached their thirties and declined rapidly thereafter. Men, on the other hand, tended to experience rather stable sexual ideation through their mi-20s until their mid-40s, and then experienced a decline in frequency of sexual thoughts. As for Schmitt et al. (2002), they found that women reported the highest levels of sexual desire when they were in their early 30s, whereas men experienced such a peak in their 20s.

It is important to mention that the studies mentioned above were not longitudinal studies; they did not show the evolution of sexual desires or orgasms among the same individuals over their life course. And while some scholars explain gender differences in the frequency of sexual desire, sexual activity, and/or orgasms over the life course with evolutionary explanations, arguing that those patterns reflect subconscious biological mechanisms intended to maximize reproduction (Schmitt et al., 2002), other scholars (Hyde & Oliver, 2000; Wiederman, 2001) point to

sociocultural influences, such as the sexual double standards that work to constrain women's sexuality much more than men's sexuality.

In line with the traditional culture-level script for heterosexual sex where penile-vaginal intercourse is considered the most important part of the sexual interaction (Fahs, 2011; Fishman & Mamo, 2001; Koedt, 1973; Vares et al., 2007), the topic of men's erectile functions was also a recurrent theme in most women's discourses. Some women — mostly those in their 30s and 40s— talked about younger men's abilities to get another erection soon after ejaculation, and therefore to prolong intercourse, as something that increased their appreciation of the sexual experience. Others talked about younger men's ability to maintain their erection for a long-time without losing it. Because of their erectile capacities, younger men were perceived as better physically equipped to satisfy women's strong sexual appetite.

Since becoming single again last year, after a four-year serious relationship with a man her age, 34-year-old Ginette realized that she was not that interested in men her age or older anymore. She explained that part of her new-found preference for younger men was due to the fact that men in their 20s were also able to have sex with her for hours, even after ejaculation, in addition to being generally more physically attractive than older men. Reflecting on the sexual experiences she had had with younger men recently — such as her experience with a 22-year-old man a week prior to her interview — she said:

*Honestly, I have no choice but to say that younger men are better sexually. [...] They put more effort, they are more intense, they have more energy, they enjoy making love for an hour. And it's fun! It's like, I don't know... I'm under the impression that older men think that five minutes [of sex] is fun. [...] The one that was 22 years old, we did it five times in a row. He wouldn't stop! I was like "Ok, again?!" (laugh) [...] the best partner I had was the youngest.
(Ginette, 34-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)*

Many women, mostly those over 40 also complained about men their age having erectile dysfunction. Indeed, roughly half of women in their 40s and 50s, mentioned how common it was for men in their age bracket to experience difficulties with achieving and maintaining strong erections and indicated that it negatively impacted sexual experiences with those men. These women talked about younger men' erectile capacities as facilitating women's ability to act on their own sexual desires.

For instance, in the last five years, 53-year-old Lana had sexual experiences with both men her age and much younger men, some of which were 10 to 20 years younger than her. Elaborating on the type of men she was looking for, she explained that she did not prefer younger men per se, but that unfortunately men her age often experienced difficulties with maintaining strong erections. Considering that she was not looking for a serious, committed relationship and that she preferred casual relationships, it appeared crucial for her to find a partner who could perform well sexually.

Reporting on how she explains her partner choices to her close friends, she said:

[I tell them], "Yeah, but a guy my age, he's already starting to have dysfunctions (small laugh)! If it's not going to be a serious relationship, if it's just for sex, I'd rather go towards a younger man that will satisfy me" [...] At least, we have fun that way [...] it's obvious that the younger he is, on a sexual level... Well, the machinery still works! Men my age, it doesn't always work. [...] What I always tell myself: at 50 years old, it's soft. And [...] once it's started, it doesn't last long. Because they have more difficulty maintaining an erection and all that.
(Lana, 53-year-old, no children, divorced)

During her interview, 49-year-old Jasmine explained that her ex-husband suffered from erectile dysfunction and that in the last 15 years of their marriage they had not had any sexual intercourse. When she got back on the dating market a few months prior to her interview, she was eager to get

sexually active again and found a man her age to go on a date with. Unfortunately, her sexual experience with him left her rather sexually unsatisfied, mostly because this new partner also suffered from erectile dysfunction. Those two experiences led her to think that age-hypogamous intimate relationships would probably be more suitable choice for her, considering how much value she placed on finding someone who could keep up with her strong libido. Reminiscing about that first sexual experience as a newly single woman, she said:

At this point I just want to get laid, at this point it's been 15 years [without sex] [...] in conversation he was great, but he was shy, and probably intimidated by this crazy-ass horny woman who wanted to get laid (big laugh). So in the end I didn't get laid; we spent an hour and fifteen minutes probably on precursor to getting laid but he never got hard enough to put a condom on. [...] I was like "Damn it! 15 years I waited! — it's like -- What the hell?! I'm not going for older [men] anymore!" So the next guy was 24.

(Jasmine, 49-year-old, mother, separated)

There is clear evidence that the likelihood of erectile dysfunction among men does increase with age (Laumann et al., 1999; Rosen et al., 2004). In fact, Laumann et al. (1999) found that men in their 50s were more than three times as likely to experience erectile dysfunction in comparison to men aged 18-29. Specifically, they found that 7 percent of men in their late teens and 20s experience such problems, compared to 18 percent men in their 50s. Similarly, Rosen et al. (2004) found that 8 percent of men in their 20s compared to 22 percent of men in their 50s self-reported erectile dysfunction. Although the women in this study expressed sympathy for those men's difficulties, they also felt that they should not have to repress their sexual desires and endure an unsatisfying sex life in order to preserve older men's masculinity and/or to conform to gendered normative expectations regarding age-appropriate sex partners. Choosing younger sex partners

was a way for them to claim their rights to be desiring women, to have active sex lives, and to take control of their own sexuality.

“I know what I like in bed and I’m not afraid to say it”: Women being sexually assertive

Most women in this study presented age-hypogamous intimate relationships as a context where being an older woman was particularly appreciated, in large part because they were perceived by younger men as much more sexually assertive than young women (i.e. women in their late teens or 20s). Indeed, a majority of women in their 30s and almost all of the women in their 40s and 50s stated that older women’s ability to express themselves and play an active role in bed was one of the main reasons why many younger men sought older women as intimate partners. The women in this study commonly reported that their younger partners had complained about young women not being sexually assertive enough.

Most often, younger men’s depictions of young women resonated with participants’ own sexual experiences as young women. Indeed, the vast majority of women talked about being sexually assertive as something that does not come naturally for women; they saw it as something that tends to develop with age, experience, and personal effort. Most of these women talked about how they had evolved over the years, from being rather timid and/or sexually passive young women, to confident and sexually assertive women. Positioning themselves as more sexually empowered than young women, they associated their ability to be sexually assertive with three main skills they had acquired with age: sexual knowledge, the ability to speak their mind, and body confidence.

First, many women associated their ability to be sexually assertive with the sexual knowledge they had accumulated through the years, more specifically their increased understanding of how their own bodies worked, what they preferred in bed, and how to maximize their own pleasure. Many

explained that it usually takes time and experience for women to learn how to ensure maximal pleasure for themselves and their partners during sex. My participants thought that without that knowledge, it was more difficult for young women to be assertive and creative in bed; instead young women would wait for men take the lead hoping that their partners knew how to please them.

Far from being ashamed or uncomfortable with the sexual experience they had accumulated through the years, these women presented their sexual history as an advantage they held over young women on the dating market. Indeed, the women in this study portrayed younger men as preferring sex partners who knew what they liked in bed and who were not afraid to guide men during sex; therefore, when it came to sex, my participants thought that older women were a better choice for younger men. For instance, Rachel had had several long-term as well as short-term age-hypogamous intimate relationships with younger men — many of them being 10 to 22 years younger than her — in the last two decades. The 49-year-old mother, who had been dating in a sexually non-exclusive way a 39-year-old man for the last two years, elaborated on how she made sense of younger men's interest for her:

*I've asked them [younger men] that question so many times! It comes back again to that, the sexual side, that we're comfortable with our bodies, we know our bodies, we are able to take initiative sexually speaking... So there's no... there's no taboo there. But we are in control – I don't mean in a dominant-submissive way – but there's no inhibitions, we are able to let ourselves go and to say, "Oh not that, not there, more to the left, a little higher", which younger women don't do.
(Rachel, 49-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)*

In the last few years, Felicity had had many younger intimate partners, most of which were in their mid-to-late 20s. The 40-year-old woman presented her knowledge and ability to communicate her

sexual preferences as traits that were seen as highly valuable in the eyes of younger men. Explaining the reasons why many younger men sought older female partners, she said:

[Younger men like] that we're more comfortable with our bodies, and that we know what we like. [...] my body, I know it, I know what I like in bed. I'm not afraid to say it. That's what they tell me.
(Felicity, 40-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

In a similar vein, some women felt that many older men were quite judgemental of women who appeared to have a lot of sexual knowledge which these women saw as acting as a deterrent to female sexual assertiveness. These women reported that older men were much more likely to hold conservative views regarding the context in which female sexuality is deemed acceptable and the type of sexual practices women should want to explore. They believed that older men were more likely to express discomfort or even 'slut-shame' them if they were to be too sexually assertive in bed, as they would be interpreted as having accumulated too much sexual experience for a woman. In this sense, demonstrating their sexual knowledge was perceived by these women as a riskier endeavour when in the arms of older men than when they were with younger men.

For instance, 37-year-old Fiona had had many younger intimate partners in the last 15 years, most of which were between four and 12 years younger than her. Elaborating on the reasons why she preferred younger sex partners to older ones, she painted a rather negative portrait of older men with regards to their attitudes towards sexually experienced:

I may look obsessed sexually, but a younger man, sexually – it's maybe why I'm more attracted towards younger men – they aren't afraid to try new things, to dare. And it's always cute to watch them go, because they are nervous, they don't have experience, but they are open to all that. While an older man, he looks at you like you're an alien or a slut. However, it's not like I've had a thousand partners! [...] If it knocks them out of their comfort zone, then they aren't into it. They imagine

that you are a slut that has tried everything. But in reality you're not a slut because you've tried things in bed! With an older man, you know – how can I say this – you look like a slut if you have experience in bed. It's not complicated, that's all there is to it; the older man thinks he is superior to you.

(Fiona, 37-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)

Second, many women explained that in order to be sexually assertive in bed, they first had to develop the self-confidence needed to speak their mind during sex. Many of the women I interviewed thought that young women were often too shy or embarrassed to express their preferences for fear of being judged by their male partners. Many saw themselves as having learned through the years that telling their intimate partners what they liked and did not like in bed was not only acceptable but also necessary if they wanted to fully enjoy sexual encounters. These women saw this skill as something that developed with age and personal efforts for most women.

For instance, like many other women in this study, 42-year-old Odette remembered feeling quite timid during sexual interactions with men when she was in her 20s. She reported that with age, she began to think that in order to truly enjoy herself during sex and maximize her own pleasure, she would have to take matters into her own hands. She also described age-hypogamous intimate relationships as enabling women to easily play a more active role during sex since it fit with the image of the sexually experienced older woman that many younger men fantasized about:

[Now that I'm older] let's just say I'm more active... In the sense that, in bed, I'm more – how do you say, not a dominatrix, but uhh – more active. I take control. It's changed. [...] I mean to say that the sex is more satisfying for me now.... I don't want to be sexually frustrated now, you know. And there's also the fact that when you're younger, you are more sensitive to... afraid of looking like a girl who's too sexual. You know, at 40 years old, you're a woman with experience. It's part of the persona, it's not the same now.

(Odette, 42-year-old, mother, divorced)

Xana, a 54-year-old woman who had many casual intimate relationships with men in their 20s in the last two years, explained that according to her younger partners, many young women expected men to take charge in bed and to do “all of the work”, which ultimately made the experience less satisfying for men. Because she imagined that young women were too afraid of being judged by men to express their sexual preferences or take the lead during sex, and because she thought that younger men preferred women who were proactive in bed, Xana felt particularly appreciated in the arms of younger men. Reporting on the discussion she had with Jean-François, the 28-year-old lover she had been dating over the past two months, she said:

He confirmed to me that [...] yes, the best sex is with older women. He says it's not all younger women that are passive. But, there are some that – and this is his expression – that “lay on their back, like a starfish, and expect you to do all the work”. I'm like “That still exists?! Young women do that?!” It's so far from my reality now, but I was probably like that in the beginning as well [when I was young] I didn't know what I was doing, there was no internet. So, even with internet today, young girls are still not certain, they don't know how to.... I imagine they are afraid of being judged.

(Xana, 54-year-old, mother, divorced)

Lastly, many women also associated their ability to be sexually assertive with the body confidence they had acquired with age. According to a majority of the women in this study, as women get older, they become more accepting of their bodies and therefore more confident in bed. While many reported feeling somewhat nostalgic of the way their bodies looked in their younger years and generally perceived young women as prettier than them, most of the women in this study reported that they were much more content with their bodies than they ever were. They now felt better equipped to resist the cultural imperative for women to equate their value as intimate partners with their physical appearance, and they were now more accepting of their so-called body

“imperfections”. They explained their body confidence as the result of aging, experience, and personal effort.

Most of the women explained that because they felt liberated — to a certain extent — from the pressure for women to have perfect and youthful bodies, they were now feeling greater freedom during sex, they expressed themselves with more confidence, and they ultimately found sex more pleasurable. For instance, 31-year-old Katarina said:

With time, we learn to accept ourselves. You know, at 20 years old, I would be naked in front of a man, and even if I was prettier than I am now – I had a really nice body from 17 to 25! – I was shy when the lights were on. And now, today, it’s really nothing (laugh). You know “Let’s go!” (enthusiastic tone). I’m really... we make love in front of a mirror and I think “wow! It’s really nice to see our bodies together”. Even if I have a bit of belly, I find it beautiful. I think we are a lot more... not accomplished, but more... We are proud of who we are, and it results in us thinking we are beautiful, so it’s easier to think that the other person also finds us beautiful... and it makes for a much nicer relationship.

(Katarina, 31-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

The women in this study saw young women’s (perceived) lack of body confidence as somewhat paralyzing them in bed, as preventing them from expressing themselves and taking the lead. Young women’s sexual assertiveness was depicted as strongly restrained by their desire to appear physically desirable to their male partners during sex. Many participants described young women as too self-conscious to show their bodies under certain lighting and/or to perform certain positions that they thought would disadvantage the appearance of their body. Others described young women as simply too absorbed in trying to look good for the male gaze to even think of what they would actually prefer to do or want their partner to do during sexual interactions. In this sense, a

woman's body confidence was described by my participants as a key element needed to be sexually assertive and play an active role during sex.

Olivia's words represent a good example how many women positioned themselves as better lovers than young women in part because of their ability to resist the cultural pressure for women to have "perfect bodies". The 42-year old woman, who had had several casual intimate relationships with men in their 20s since becoming single again at age 38, explained why many younger men prefer older women as intimate partners:

It's the fact that we're more, you know, confident about ourselves. And we are going to walk into the room in our lingerie, if we have cellulite or not, you know? And a younger woman would be like "Oh my God! I can't wear this in front of him! Turn the lights off, in case he sees me, he's not going to like it!". Just thinking about what position she's in because "What if he sees my fat!?", and we [older women] are just like "Whatever, I've got fat, whatever, (small laugh) I don't care"! I think because we are more into the moment, and we're more able to focus on them. Because we are less worried about what we are doing or not doing, or if it's right or if it's wrong or whatever, it makes the experience more fun. [...] it's just that we are more comfortable with ourselves and we know more about what we like. If we like something in a certain position, we are not going to be shy to say it! We'd be like "Hey! can you do this in this way?"

(Olivia, 42-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

Overall, the vast majority of women in this study, regardless of their age, depicted age-hypogamous intimate relationships as a context where women were encouraged to be sexually assertive. Indeed, they perceived younger men to prefer women who were sexually experienced, who could speak their mind during sex, and who were body confident. Because they imagined these traits as developing with age for women, most participants perceived themselves as better lovers than younger women.

“They wanted to satisfy me before themselves”: Women wanting to reach maximal pleasure

While the women in this study emphasized how younger men appreciated women who are sexually assertive in bed, and expressed pride in thinking of themselves as better lovers than young women, one should abstain from interpreting this as an indication that these women were once again caught up in the cultural imperative for women to perform sex in a way that is intended to provide men with a high-quality experience and to put men’s sexual pleasure before their own. On the contrary, these women talked about being sexually confident and taking the lead in bed first and foremost as a way to them control their own sexual experience and amplify their own sexual pleasure. In fact, when discussing heterosexual sex, the women in this study placed a lot importance on ensuring that their pleasure would be attended to. They discussed their ability to reach maximal pleasure as strongly associated with three main traits in men: men’s stamina, men’s sexual openness, and/or men’s conscious attempt to prioritize female pleasure during sex. According to most women in this study, being in an age-hypogamous intimate relationships facilitated their efforts to ensure that their pleasure was attended to during sex.

First, the majority of the women in this study were looking for partners who had the physical capacities needed to satisfy them sexually. As discussed earlier, men’s strong sex drive and reliable erectile capacities were rather common topics during women’s interviews. A majority of women in all three age groups perceived these traits as necessary for them not only to act on their strong sex drive, but also to reach maximal pleasure during sex. For instance, younger men’s abilities to have multiple erections meant for many women that their own pleasure would not be automatically cut short because of their partners’ orgasm. 53-year-old Lana, who had recently dated a few men 10 to 20 years her junior, elaborated on how younger men’s stamina influenced her pleasure:

On a sexual note, obviously there's a difference, it's clear. The guy who is 30-year-old, or 40-year-old, he will be more able to maintain the energy level. So, he'll be able to pleasure you longer, to keep you in a state of bliss longer, to make it last. So, it has a big impact.
(Lana, 53-year-old, no children, divorced)

Some women discussed how men's erectile dysfunctions affected the sexual dynamic, more precisely the level of attention that could be dedicated towards female pleasure. For instance, 51-year-old Ariel had had many younger intimate partners in the last five years, some of which were more than 20 years her junior while others were only six or seven years younger than her. At the time of her interview, she was currently romantically involved with Jacob, a 33-year-old man she had been dating in a sexually non-exclusive way for roughly two years. She explained that dealing with a man's erectile dysfunction meant that little attention would be spent on her pleasure, as her partner would be too focussed on trying to get and maintain his erection. Since, in her experience, younger men were rarely impotent, she saw age-hypogamous intimate relationships as offering a more egalitarian balance in terms of energy dedicated to male and female sexual pleasure, and therefore as a better choice for older women. Explaining her discontent with men her age and their sexual performance, Ariel said:

I don't want men my age. [...] personally, I don't feel like applauding when a guy has an erection. And I don't feel like spending a million years focusing on his erection. You know, the guy who rubs himself down there, everything has to be focused on him, because he has to get hard. I can't stand that, you know!
(Ariel, 51-year-old, no children, divorced)

Second, while men's physical capacities were important factors influencing women's ability to reach maximal pleasure, a large proportion of women perceived men's openness with regards to

sexual practices as affecting their sexual satisfaction. These women reported wanting their intimate partners to be as open and sexually adventurous as they were. They talked, for instance, about wanting to experiment with new sexual practices and/or try unorthodox locations where to have sex. Roughly a third of the women in this study explained that their choice of younger sex partners was partly motivated by the fact that they perceived younger men as more likely to be as eager as them to expand their sexual horizons.

For instance, 57-year-old Naomie felt like her sexual life blossomed once she started exploring sex with younger men, after her separation from her 70-year-old long-time spouse. The woman who had spent all of her life dating men her age or older found herself happily surprised and aroused at younger men's sexual openness. Comparing her current younger sex partners — men who were in their late 40s and early 50s — with men her age or older, she explained that sex was more satisfying with younger men, in part, because younger men were much more flexible with regard to the kind of sexual practices they were interested in doing:

The younger men are more open-minded. I look at the partners I've had who are younger and they'll have ideas, fantasies, sexual practices that are more interesting, more exciting... [...] for example Jimmy [my 58 year old partner] – I'll say it bluntly – It's not just the missionary position, but not far from it! And I'm the one that insists on doing something else! Otherwise, it would just be routine. While with my younger partners, they are more creative. And personally, that's what I like: they are VERY creative.

(Naomie, 57-year-old, mother, divorced)

Reflecting on her recent sexual history, 43-year-old Yvonne reported having had sex with both younger and older men. One of her recent partners was in his mid-twenties, some were in their 30s, while the rest were in their late-40s. Comparing her experiences of sex with younger men

with those of sex with older men, she felt like men her age or older were less interested in expanding their repertoire of sexual practices. She thought that older men's unadventurous approach to sexuality was in part due to their perception that non-traditional sexual practices are reserved for young people. She also believed that many men her age or older were raised with a conservative view of sexuality, one that provides a very limited list of socially acceptable sexual practices:

*I don't know how to explain the fun of being with younger men. It's that they're ready to experiment with new things, sexually and all. While with older men, it's like they think it's behind them, or they're too conservative to go there. [...] Younger men, often they have more of a desire to try lots of new things.
(Yvonne, 43-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)*

Lastly, more than a third of the women in this study also perceived younger men as putting more emphasis on women's pleasure during sex compared to men their age or older. These women depicted the sexual script with younger men as dedicating more room to the female orgasm compared to the sexual script found in age-hypergamous intimate relationships. Many reported that younger men were more likely to be excited when seeing women getting aroused and climaxing, and that they tended to put more energy into ensuring women could orgasm. Many also reported that younger men were much more likely to want their female partners to have an orgasm before they did, a dynamic they rarely experienced with men their age or older. Overall, women explained choosing younger partners. in part. because they perceived younger men as making women feel like that their pleasure deserved as much (if not more) attention as men's pleasure, as construing women's pleasure— and not just their own— as a goal of sex.

As mentioned earlier, 36-year-old Uma's first age-hypogamous intimate relationship was with Petrov, a man who was 7 years younger than her and who she ended up dating, in a serious and committed way, for 4 months. Describing her sexual experience with that ex-boyfriend, she explained how he would build his own excitement by sexually pleasing her, a sexual dynamic she was not used to at the time. She explained that since that first younger partner, she began to seek younger men almost exclusively, thinking that they were more likely to satisfy her sexually:

[My first younger partner] he really, really paid attention to my needs. He was extremely attentive. Personally, I need to be with a partner like that (laugh). He found his pleasure in my excitement. And that is pretty exceptional! (laugh) [...] He was really excited when I (emphasis) was into it. Therefore he would do everything so that I would be excited. And we took our... The whole thing lasted for very long time! It was very long, it could easily last an hour and a half. And, the penetration was pretty long, but before that, you know, all the foreplay was very exciting. (Uma, 36-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Throughout her adult life, 49-year-old Rachel had mostly dated younger men, some of which were more than 15 years her junior. However, she did have some experiences with men her age or older. Comparing her experiences of the sexual dynamics found in age-hypogamous intimate relationships with that found in age-hypergamous relationships, she reported that overall, younger men were much more likely than men her age or older to see the ideal sexual interaction as one where the woman reached climax before men did and more likely to try to achieve that goal. In the arms of younger men, she felt like her sexual pleasure mattered which was one of the main reasons why she tended to choose younger intimate partners. Elaborating on her perceptions of younger men and older men, she said:

A younger man, he wants sex, he wants good sex and he'll give it to you. Not that an older man won't, but umm... In my lifetime, those that gave me the most were

the younger ones. They wanted to satisfy my needs before theirs. They were happy that I had an orgasm or that I had pleasure. [...] It was the opposite for the older ones. They will think of their pleasure first. I'm maybe generalizing, but that is pretty well how it was in my case.

(Rachel, 49-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)

Some women believed that younger men put greater effort into pleasing them during sex because they tended to put older women on a pedestal, to see them as somewhat 'out of their league'. These women thought that younger men considered themselves lucky to have managed to seduce an older woman and that younger men therefore actively tried to prove that they deserved their older partner's interest. Therefore, the power dynamic at play was different than what they felt within age-hypergamous intimate relationships. For instance, describing her experiences with Frank and Sean, two men in their early 20s that she had dated in a casual way for a few months each, 32-year-old Annabelle stated:

I liked the way Sean made love to me, It was very, very sensual and [...] he made me feel like a goddess. [...] most the time, the first time I have sex with a man, I rarely find the sex to be exceptional. But with him, and also with Frank [...], they were very good. At the same time, I'm speaking about my experience, it doesn't necessarily mean younger men are better the first time, but I'm under the impression that they try a bit harder, that they try to impress you with their skills, and their prowess, what they are able to do, and to what extent they can pleasure you. I have the feeling that they try harder than older men. You know, the older man, he's like "Been there, done that." While the younger man, he will try to impress you. Oh yes, I'm telling you! That's what I noticed. At the same time, it isn't a big sample size; I've had two younger men.

(Annabelle, 32-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

Before concluding this section, it is worth noting that while most women reported choosing younger sex partners, in part, because they assumed the sexual experience would be more

pleasurable and satisfying than with men their age or older, some women also specified that not all younger men were generous lovers and that one should be careful with generalizations. For instance, 40-year old Felicity stated that, generally speaking, younger men tried harder than older men to please their female partners. However, she did have one negative experience with a 26-year-old man who cared very little about her pleasure during sex. Despite her attempts to guide him and make him a more attentive lover, he would not change his ways. Refusing to see her sexual pleasure be so blatantly ignored during sex, she confronted him and then terminated their short-lived fling:

I only saw him twice. Ah! He was selfish in bed! It wasn't good. And uhh, I told him quite clearly. I told him "If I have a younger lover, it's because I want to have fun. – I told him – You, it doesn't work (laugh)". I tried to teach him a little bit, but no luck (laugh).

(Felicity, 40-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Similarly, 53-year-old Helene explained that until recently, she believed younger men would automatically be better lovers than men her age, because they were less likely to experience erectile dysfunctions. Indeed, she felt that when men experienced difficulties with achieving or maintaining a strong erection, it complicated sexual interactions and ultimately impacted her sexual pleasure in a negative way. However, based on her experiences with Jean-Pascal— a man 12 years younger than her who she dated for roughly 2 years until a year ago— and 30-year-old David — the man was currently dating— she realized that younger men's ability to have strong erections was not a guarantee of sexual bliss for her. She said:

David told me "You'll see, I'm a great lover". But the last time we had sex, yes, he was hard and all, but it was more robotic than anything else. It wasn't good. Ok, it's great that he has strong erections, but there is more to sex than just penetration!
(Helene, 53-year-old, mother, divorced)

Conclusion

In line with some aspects of common cultural representations of ‘cougars’, the women in this study presented themselves as having a strong sex drive and as confident, sexually assertive women. Based on their accounts of sex with younger men, it appears that the sexual dynamic within age-hypogamous intimate relationships departs, to some level, from the traditional, culture-level script for (heterosexual) sex. Indeed, age-hypogamous intimate relationships were depicted as a context where women were encouraged to present themselves as highly desiring and sexually assertive, and where it is easier for women to ensure that their pleasure be attended to. In fact, these women reported that, compared to their sexual interactions with men their age or older, it was easier for them to disrupt the traditional, culture-level script for (heterosexual) sex when they were with younger sex partners.

The women in this study provided important insights as to why the sexual dynamic within age-hypogamous intimate relationships differs from the one found within similar-age or age-hypergamous intimate relationships. Based on women’s discourses, I suggest that, with younger men, women can more easily perform sex in a way that challenges some aspects of the traditional culture-level script for (heterosexual) sex because: 1) women perceive younger men as preferring confident, highly desiring, sexually experienced women; 2) women perceive younger men as fantasizing about older women, which shifts the gender power dynamic at play during sex; and 3) younger men’s stamina facilitates women’s ability to express their sexual desires and act on them.

First, most women reported feeling more comfortable to disrupt certain aspects of the traditional script for (heterosexual) sex in the arms of younger men than when they were with men their age or older because they perceived younger men as preferring sexually assertive women with high sex drives. On the other hand, many women reported that men their age or older were often

uncomfortable if women presented themselves as highly desiring and/or as having accumulated much sexual experience and knowledge. Furthermore, many women reported that their younger partners had complained about young women's lack of sexual experience, lack of confidence, and/or passivity in bed. Their younger partners had emphasized how pleasant it was for them to be with women who were confident in their own skins, who knew what they liked in bed and who were not afraid to say it. My participants' perceptions of younger men as preferring sexually empowered women combined with their perceptions of young women as inexperienced and passive lovers facilitated women's ability to take on a more active role in bed and express themselves in a way that allowed them to reach maximal pleasure.

My participants' interpretations of young men's appreciation of sexually assertive women resonate with recent research on young men's sexual desires and practices. Indeed, based on 32 interviews with young men aged 18-24 years old, Dworkin and O'Sullivan (2005) found that although the majority of young men tended to initiate sexual practices with their female partners, very few reported preferring male-dominated patterns of initiation. In fact, most young men reported that their ideal sexual interaction would be one where the two partners shared the responsibility of sexual initiation, and one out of four young men actually preferred a female-dominated pattern of initiation. Other studies show that a large portion of young men wish their partners would ask them to perform clitoral stimulation or would touched themselves if they wanted to, and that women showing them what they liked was a turn-on (Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). Overall, it appears that many younger men would prefer women to be more assertive in bed.

Younger men's depictions of young women as rather passive in bed also resonated with women's own personal experiences as young women. In fact, the vast majority of women in this study perceived aging as having a liberating effect on women's sexuality. Indeed, they talked about

sexual assertiveness as something that does not come naturally for women. Many talked about having to learn to disregard the sexual double standards and/or the cultural imperative for women to equate their value with their physical appearance. Many also pointed out how it takes time for women to understand how their own bodies work and how important it is to learn that it is reasonable for them to request that their sexual pleasure be attended to.

While the dichotomized view of older versus younger women presented by the women in this study is arguably an exaggerated portrait of how older women differ from young women, the literature on young adults' sexual practices supports, to a certain extent, these participants' perceptions of young women as constrained in their ability to act in an assertive way during (heterosexual) sex. For instance, based on interviews with young adults aged 18-22 years old, Salisbury and Fisher (2014) found that most women believed that it was men's responsibility to physically stimulate women until they reached an orgasm, and that they would therefore wait for men to provide them with pleasure. Studies also show that young women are often too shy to ask men to do certain sexual act that they enjoy (i.e. manual stimulation of the clitoris, cunnilingus) or to take the matter into their own hands and self-stimulate (Backstrom et al., 2012; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014), especially in the context of casual sex (Backstrom et al., 2012; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014).

In fact, research shows that while growing up, most women receive very little (if any) information about the role of the clitoris in female sexual pleasure (Kamen, 2000) which inevitably complicates their efforts to request clitoral stimulation as young women. Considering that clitoral stimulation significantly increases the likelihood of experiencing an orgasm during sex for women (Armstrong et al., 2012; Hite, 1976; Koedt, 1973; Richters et al., 2006), women's knowledge of the role the clitoris has in women's pleasure and their ability to self-stimulate or request oral sex during sexual

interactions has been proven to have a direct effect on women's likelihood of experiencing an orgasm during sex (Armstrong et al., 2012; Kamen, 2000).

Second, I suggest that women's perceptions of younger men as fantasizing about older women and the idea that younger men perceive older women as better lovers than young women, contributed to shifting the gender power dynamics, providing women with more confidence in themselves, and facilitating women's ability to assert themselves. In fact, many women perceived the dating market as one that was filled with younger men fantasizing about sleeping with older women, but one comprising of very few women open to age-hypogamous intimate relationships. Many women reported feeling like younger men put them on a pedestal and were actively trying to prove that they were deserving of older women's interest. Combined with younger men's discourses about how older women are better lovers than young women, younger men's (perceived) fantasies about older women made it easier for women to re-negotiate gendered expectations for appropriate female sexual behavior.

Third, women's ability to destabilize the traditional, culture-level script was also facilitated by younger men's stamina. Most women talked about younger men's high sex drive and their erectile capacities as facilitating their efforts to present themselves as highly desiring, to act on their sexual desires, and to ensure that they could reach maximal pleasure. Indeed, many women described being at times uncomfortable with acting on their strong libido when partnered with men their age or older, as they perceived the risk of being criticized for being highly desiring and/or the risk of hurting their partner's masculinity to be higher than in age-hypogamous intimate relationships.

One should note that while women reported challenging certain aspects of the traditional, culture-level script for (hetero) sex when partnered with younger men, they also reproduced other aspects

of the script. For instance, the women in this study placed a great value on men's erectile capacities, reproducing the idea that penile-vaginal intercourse is the most important part of the sexual interaction (Fahs, 2011; Fishman & Mamo, 2001; Rostosky & Travis, 2000; Vares et al., 2007). Furthermore, many women — mostly women in their 40s and 50s — saw the careful filtering of potential younger sex partners as a crucial step they had to go through in order to find men who would provide them with a respectful and pleasurable experience, one where they would not feel reduced to a sex object of temporary value. This last discourse highlights how gendered power dynamics influencing heterosexual sex are not automatically evacuated because of the age difference between partners, and that women often feel like they must deploy strategies to avoid being potentially “used” by younger men.

Finally, it is worth noting that by describing younger men as preferring sexually empowered women and by depicting sexual empowerment as something that develops with age in women, the women in this study counteracted the common societal discourse equating women's value as intimate partners with their youth and physical appearance. Indeed, by emphasizing their sexual skills, the women in this study managed to neutralize (although temporarily — see chapter 5) the common societal discourse indicating that as intimate partners, older women are less valuable than young women, and repositioned themselves as highly valuable partners.

In the next chapter, I discuss the way women engaged in age-hypogamous intimate relationships see the future with their younger partners. Specifically, I explore the factors women take into consideration when reflecting on how long they think their intimate relationships with younger men will last. I also show how a woman's age influences her assessment of her age-hypogamous intimate relationships' longevity potential.

CHAPTER 5 — FLING OR FOREVER? WOMEN’S PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR AGE-HYPOGAMOUS INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS’ LONGEVITY POTENTIAL

Studies show that as they age, women become increasingly open to the idea of having a younger male partner (Caron, 2005; Jagger, 2005; Levesque & Caron, 2004; Montenegro, 2003; Pixley et al., 2007), and to engage in age-hypogamous intimate relationships (Alarie & Carmichael, 2015; Darroch et al., 1999; Laumann et al., 1994; Montenegro, 2003). In fact, roughly one in five single American women aged 40-69 report that their current or last male dating partner was at least five years younger than them (Montenegro, 2003). Using the 2002 NSFG and analyzing all of the sexual relationships women aged 35-44 had had in the previous year, Alarie and Carmichael (2015) also found that more than half of women’s age-hypogamous relationships (using a five-year age gap) had begun two years before their interview, and that a large portion of women who reported having a younger sex partner were in fact cohabiting with and/or married to their partner. While these results suggest that age-hypogamous intimate relationships are often more than flings, there are still many unanswered questions regarding the durability of age-hypogamous intimate relationships.

One must note that there is considerable empirical evidence indicating that women use different criteria to assess the desirability of a male partner depending on whether they are looking for a dating partner or a marriage partner (Buunk et al., 2001; Montenegro, 2003; Regan & Berscheid, 1997; Urbaniak & Kilmann, 2003). For instance, they tend to place more importance on a man’s physical appearance when looking for a casual sex partner than a marriage partner (Regan & Berscheid, 1997; Urbaniak & Kilmann, 2003). Furthermore, Montenegro (2003) found that women aged 40-69 are more likely to mention “financial stability” as an important trait they want in a

male partner if they are looking for a marriage partner compared to a dating partner. This suggests that what women find desirable in a younger man they want to casually date might not be what they seek if they wish to develop a long-term intimate relationship which could complicate their ability/desire to let their relationship develop.

Furthermore, we have little information about the quality of the interpersonal dynamic between partners within age-hypogamous intimate relationships, and how that compares to other relationship forms. Some studies show that individuals in such relationships (using a 10-year age gap definition) report the highest levels of romantic satisfaction and commitment, compared to both age-hypergamous and similar-age relationships (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2008). Other studies paint a more negative portrait of the dynamic within age-hypogamous intimate relationships; indeed, some studies show that individuals in intimate relationships where there is a large age-gap between partners (either age-hypogamous or age-hypergamous intimate relationships) face a higher risk of intimate partner homicide than individuals in similar-age relationships (Brietman, Shackelford, & Block, 2004; Shackelford, 2001a, 2001b).

There are also inconsistencies in the literature with regards to the influence of the age difference on the likelihood of divorce and whether this effect differs depending on whether the intimate relationship is age-hypogamous or age-hypergamous. Some studies indicate that both age-hypergamous and age-hypogamous married couples (using a five-year age gap definition) are more likely to divorce than similar-age couples (Hall & Zhao, 1995). Others show that the chance of divorce is higher when the wife is older than when the husband is older (Gentleman & Park, 1994). Other researchers found no significant relationship between age heterogamy (either age hypergamy or age hypogamy) and the likelihood of divorce (B. Wilson & Smallwood, 2008). Some studies also show that regardless of whether the relationship is age-hypogamous or age-

hypergamous, when married couples choose to separate, it is most often the younger partner who asks for divorce (England et al., 2016).

In fact, the literature has provided very little insight into the factors that influence individuals' relationship satisfaction in the context of age-hypogamous intimate relationships or the considerations that could facilitate/complicate the longevity of age-hypogamous intimate relationships. The few qualitative studies on age-hypogamous marriages with large age gaps between partners (Proulx et al., 2006; Warren, 1996) indicate that fear of stigma and doubts with respect to their own physical attractiveness are important obstacles that women report facing. Nonetheless, there are still many unanswered questions regarding age-hypogamous intimate relationships' development, especially before such relationships become more formalized through marriage or common-law unions. Indeed, it is unclear so far what influences women who date younger men to believe (or not) that their relationship will survive the test of time and what influences them to pursue (or not) their relationship.

In this chapter, I explore the factors women take into consideration when reflecting on whether they think their intimate relationships with younger men will last. I found that, when assessing their age-hypogamous intimate relationships' longevity potential, most women — especially women in their 30s and 40s — struggled with resisting the traditional conception of women's worth on the dating market as associated with their physical attractiveness and their reproductive capacities/childrearing aptitudes. Nevertheless, these were not the only considerations influencing women's perception of the longevity potential of their relationships with younger men. Many participants — mostly women in their 30s and 40s— identified their younger partners (perceived) disinterest for settling down and (perceived) lack of maturity as potential obstacles to their relationships' longevity.

Some women also pointed to stigma as a factor that complicated their ability/desire to develop their age-hypogamous intimate relationships, a perception that was intensified in relationships where the woman and her partner had a very large age difference. Finally, unlike what one would expect using the traditional version of social exchange theory (Elder, 1969; Goode, 1966; Rosenfeld, 2005; Schoen & Wooldredge, 1989; South, 1991; Taylor & Glenn, 1976) or evolutionary psychology theory (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Ellis & Walsh, 1997; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992), only a minority of women presented younger men's financial resources or socioeconomic status as potential obstacles to age-hypogamous intimate relationships' longevity.

I also found that, compared to women in their 30s and 40s, women in their 50s seemed to be much less preoccupied with whether or not their age-hypogamous intimate relationship would last, and they tended to identify less potential obstacles that could affect the longevity of their relationships. I explain this by the fact that younger and older participants differed with regards to (a) their dating goals, specifically whether they wished to eventually move in with/marry their partner and to have (more) children, and (b) their perceptions of alternative dating options.

Wanting to settle down (or not)

One of the major considerations women in this study mentioned as influencing their ability to realistically believe that their relationships would last was whether they perceived their younger partners to be ready (or almost ready) to settle down and whether that matched their own dating goals. Indeed, wanting to settle down or not was a very common theme in women's stories, one that significantly shaped the way they envision the future with their younger partners. Settling down was usually described by the women in this study as something partners do when they believe they found 'the one' and wish to start building a future with that person. It was usually equated with moving in together and, in some cases, getting married. Many also talked about

making long-term plans (e.g. planning a trip together, talking about future children) and committing to sexual exclusivity as signs that one is on the path towards settling down.

Younger participants differed significantly from older participants with regard to whether they wished to eventually settle down with someone. The vast majority of women in their 30s and many women in their 40s talked about wanting to eventually find that one person that could be their life partner. Some of these women were hoping to start building a future with a life partner soon, while others reported wanting to continue to date around for a few more years before settling down. Ultimately, the vast majority of women in their 30s and a considerable portion of women in their 40s hoped to settle down in the future. Most of them talked about the age difference as complicating the possibility of developing their relationships, as they wondered whether younger men were as ready (or close to being ready) as they were to take that path.

For the participants who were hoping to settle down soon, knowing that their younger partners were on the same page allowed them to have more faith in the durability of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships. For instance, when I met 33-year-old Yasmina, her 26-year-old boyfriend Joel and her had recently decided to ‘officialise’ their relationship and to become ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’, after several months of a casual relationship. Elaborating on how she envisioned the future of her relationship, she described herself as quite confident regarding the likelihood that her relationship with him would last. Her assessment was based, in large part, on the fact that he had told her that he was ready for long-term commitment and that he was planning to have kids with her in the next few years. She admitted that, because of his young age, she sometimes wondered whether he was as convinced as she was about wanting to go down that path. However, Yasmina considered the risk to be rather small, and she thought it was not worth breaking up over it:

I'm at an age where I really know what I want in life. Yes, I'm ready to settle down and all. [...] As for him, he says he is ready. But is that really what he wants? Will he get to 30 years old and feel like he needs change? [...] Even if he says he is ready for something stable, he might not be there 100%, in the same way I can be at my age. Yes, I'll settle down and do everything I can to make the relationship work. I won't give up at the first obstacle, the first relationship issues, because at a certain point I want to go forward in life with my partner.
(Yasmina, 33-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Like Yasmina, 32-year-old Becky was hoping to see her age-hypogamous intimate relationship progress towards greater commitment, such as moving in together and making long-term plans together. Taking into consideration the fact that her boyfriend Brandon was nine years younger than her, she felt it was important to give him some time before starting to ask those questions. Unfortunately, after three years, they came to the conclusion that they did not have the same expectations regarding the progression of their relationship and called it quits the day before her interview. Still quite sad about the very recent break-up, Becky elaborated on her perception of people in their 20s and how they compared to individuals in their 30s. She argued that 20-something people generally have very different expectations with regards to relationship commitment compared to people in their 30s which can be a major obstacle to the survival of age-hypogamous intimate relationships in the long run.

I'm in love with someone but unfortunately, he's younger... too young. I would like for him to be 30 years old. It would be simpler for me then! I think we could stay together, you know. But, that's not possible. He isn't ready to move in with me. Personally, I've been ready for a year and a half. [...] When we're younger, [...] we're not yet into the 'building a relationship' state of mind – in any case, that's what I think – we live pretty superficially. You know, we're happy, we love each other, we do activities together, but there's no building towards something together, no "I'm going to support you out with life stuff".
(Becky 32-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Like many women in their 30s and 40s, 40-year-old Felicity reported wanting to one day find a man with whom she could have a serious relationship and settle down. She imagined that younger men were not ready for that kind of commitment. Therefore, she reported purposely categorizing all of her age-hypogamous intimate relationships as flings and did not try to pursue long-term relationships with any of them. She explained that casually dating men in their 20s was a way for her to ensure frequent and high-quality sexual activity, while keeping the door open for the right man — a man her age — to come along. For Felicity, younger men's (perceived) reluctance to settle down was a major obstacle to her age-hypogamous intimate relationships' durability:

*I'm open to having flings [...]. It's just that if they are younger, I'm going to categorize that as a fling. And if they are a bit older, then I'll try to make it something more serious. [...] Younger men in their 20s aren't ready yet to settle down. (pause) I could be wrong. Maybe there are some, but I don't know...
(Felicity, 40-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)*

There were a considerable portion of participants in their 40s who had previously experienced marriage or a common-law union with a man they thought would be their life companion and who were now hoping to get a second chance at finding 'the one'. For instance, 49-year-old Tatianna reported that she would like to one day cohabit with a partner and get married again. She wished Omar, her 31-year-old boyfriend who she had been dating for roughly two years, would want to at least move in with her, but he did not seem to be ready for that kind of commitment yet. During her interview, she explained that while she was choosing to stay with him for now, she knew that she might have to break up with him one day if he did not change his mind about settling down with her.

I still want to get married. That's something I care about. If Omar wasn't so afraid [of such commitment] I think we could make it work long-term. [...] I don't think it's a feasible for him, he's not there yet. That's why I'm saying that at some point, there are some steps that I will want to take. And if he doesn't want to follow me... (pause) [...] You know, he's giving me what he's capable of offering at the moment. And I take what he's capable of giving me. If one day, I'm no longer happy in this, then I'm going to move on.
(Tatianna, 49-year-old, no children, divorced)

As I mentioned earlier, there was also a considerable portion of women in their 30s and 40s who reported wanting to eventually find the right person with whom they could build a future, but who did not feel ready to settle down just yet. In some cases, these participants were looking for casual relationships as a way to heal from a heartbreak and preferred to date men in a non-exclusive way until they felt ready to embark on a long-term, serious relationship again. Other participants talked about wanting to extend the commitment-free lifestyle that they associated with young adulthood for a few more years, until they felt ready to engage in a sexually-exclusive, serious, long-lasting relationship. In both scenarios, these women thought it was easier to date younger men, in part, because they perceived younger men to be less likely than men their age or older to pressure them down the path towards sexual exclusivity, cohabitation, and/or marriage. However, most of these women reported seeing their age-hypogamous intimate relationships as having an expiration date, because they did not anticipate that their younger partners would be on the same page when they would finally be ready to settle down.

For instance, 34-year old Valerie had had several 'one-night-stands' and short-lived flings with younger men since she became single again two years ago, after more than five years in a serious, committed relationship with a man six years her senior. Currently enjoying the freedom that came with her single status, she reported feeling like she was still a 20-something woman at heart

because of her lifestyle; she enjoyed going out at night and drinking on a weekly basis, she had no desire to anticipate what her future would look like, and she was not ready to settle down with a man yet. Choosing younger men was a way for her to avoid the stability and predictability that she associated with men her age or older, and a way to engage in casual, satisfying sexual relationships without feeling pressured to settle down. However, she mentioned a few times during her interview how when she is ready for a more serious relationship, she would probably choose a man her age since she perceived younger men as not interested in settling down anytime soon:

It has been a long time that older men haven't attracted me. Often, they don't have the same energy as me, and maybe I'm a bit nuts. It feels like I don't get older, that I stay in my 20s. I might stay in my 20s my whole life, it seems. My rhythm in life is similar to the one I had in my 20s. I feel that's why I end up with younger men (...). I don't really like stability... Where will I be in five years? I don't know and I don't want to know. There's something about being settled with someone that doesn't attract me. It's as if older men represent that.
(Valerie, 34-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

Like participants in their 30s and 40s, many women in their 50s also perceived younger men as not interested in settling down. However, very few 50-something women described younger men's (perceived) lack of interest for settling down as a potential obstacle. In fact, while most women in their 30s and many women in their 40s talked about younger men's (perceived) disinterest for settling down as something that could prevent them from pursuing their relationships with their younger partners, some women in their 40s and a large portion of women in their 50s described dating younger men as a way for them to avoid feeling pressured into that kind of commitment.

Many women in their 40s and 50s perceived men their age or older as pushing for cohabitation, and as "looking for a new wife" who would take care of them and alleviate some of their

housework burden, which repelled the vast majority of them. Indeed, many of these women saw similar-age's or older men's desire to reproduce the traditional relationship progression model where intimate partners eventually move in together as something that discouraged them from having lasting intimate relationships with men their age or older. Many older participants also perceived men their age or older as expecting their intimate relationships to move quickly towards highly emotionally-invested, time-consuming relationships which they also saw as a draw back of age-hypergamous intimate relationships.

For instance, when I met 53-year-old Pauline, she had been dating Loic, a man nine years her junior, in a sexually non-exclusive way for roughly four years, and she was quite optimistic about the longevity potential of her relationship. She explained how she had approached dating since becoming single again in her late 40s, after decades of married life. While she was not interested in accumulating temporary flings, she was neither interested in falling back into the traditional model where partners move in together, start sharing expenses, and financial resources, and eventually get married. Maintaining her independence while being romantically involved with a man was a non-negotiable issue for her:

Personally, it was clear I didn't want a new husband. That was very clear, and it still is. I didn't want a guy that, we date for two-three months and then move in together No, no, no! That's also for my kids, as they still live with me. No, I don't feel like managing a cohabitation situation. Pffffff! No! But, [...] you know, but I don't want to start dating again every two weeks because it's just casual sex, a short-lived fling, and then it's over. I'd like a companion, you know, someone that I would see on a regular basis, but that would have his own place, that would be perfect. [...] I think that's one of the reasons I wouldn't want a man my age. [...] Their idea of a relationship, of the man-woman dynamic – there are exceptions, obviously - but in general, they are pretty traditional, and that bothers me. It annoys me!

(Pauline, 53-year-old, mother, divorced)

After having experienced a few disappointing relationships and heartbreaks, 43-year-old Caroline modified her dating goals and decided to look for a casual, yet monogamous intimate relationship with a man. It was important for her to find a partner who would not be too time-consuming, and who would not want to eventually move in with her, as she was no longer interested in that type of relationship. Perceiving men her age and older as unlikely to want the same thing as her, she decided to turn her attention towards younger men. Since she made that decision a few years ago, she dated several men in their 20s or early 30s, some more seriously than others. While she was not seeing anyone at the time of her interview, the mother of three reported hoping to find a younger partner in the near future, as she perceived them as more likely to share her views of intimate relationship and commitment:

I voluntarily chose to change my dating patterns and start dating younger men; men that won't want to commit or move in with me next week, that won't text every two minutes asking me "Where are you? What are you doing?" (imitating an annoying voice). I don't feel like having those kinds of constraint. My ideal, I haven't found it yet, but it would be to date someone regularly, just one person, exclusively – like we would only have each other - but we only see each other every now and then, go do activities, make love together. Then you go back home, we text, we are also friends, you don't interfere with my daily life, you don't harass me with your questions, with your "Do you love me? I love you... blah bah blah". [...] I'm just not ready to get involved with someone emotionally like that again. And with a younger man, it's going to be fine with them. Men my age, they don't want to just date; they want to settle down. While younger men, they don't necessarily want to settle down. Well, not with a woman my age anyways.

(Caroline, 43-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)

As for 51-year-old Monica, she explained that before meeting Brandon, the 42-year-old man she had been dating in a non-exclusive way in the last year and a half, she did try to meet men her age a few times. However, she felt that often, men her age were looking to settle down which did not

correspond with her dating goals. In fact, she explained that she preferred a “friendship with benefits” type of relationship, which very few men in their 50s were willing to embark on. She added that keeping her housing independence was also very important to her, and that she was not willing to compromise on that aspect of her lifestyle. She felt that younger men were much more likely to accept the type of relationship she wanted to have. She explained her reasoning:

The reason I brush off older men at the moment, is not a sexual issue, it's because, honestly, they usually want to settle down, commit, and all that. Because they've often known long-term relationships. For some their previous relationship lasted 10-15-25 years, and that's what they want: to rebuild their lives. Start another 20 years with another woman, because that's all they've known [...]. They want to commit, that's for sure. And personally, living together under the same roof, I'm not sure I want that. [...] I did it once, but never again, it's been 17 years that I've been single. I've never lived with someone again, and I'm not sure I want to. My ideal would be 'each their own house'. But, men my age, it's not really what they want.

(Monica, 51-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)

The differences among younger and older participants with regards to their commitment expectations were in line with previous studies on women’s motivations for dating. Research shows women in their early 30s are much more likely than women over 50 to approach dating with the hope of finding their “happily ever after” love story (Lichtenstein, 2012), and to hope that their relationship will lead to marriage (Mahay & Lewin, 2007). In fact, examining the dating expectations of individuals in their 50s, 60s and 70s who use online dating, McWilliams and Barrett (2014) found that most women were disinterested in (re)marriage²². The literature also

²² In their study, (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014) found that men over 50 were more likely than women in the same age group to be looking for marriage. In fact, compared to women, men sought more commitment from new partners, whom they perceived as sources of emotional support and as helping them with traditionally feminine household chores such as cooking and cleaning.

indicates that single women in their 50s or older who are interested in finding an intimate partner tend to seek companionship that would not require of them to play an important caring role, as many of them perceived men their age to expect their female partner to take on the roles akin to a housewife and a nurse (Lichtenstein, 2012; McWilliams & Barrett, 2014).

What the findings of this study suggest is that younger men's (perceived) reluctance towards settling down is most often seen as an obstacle to relationship longevity among women in their 30s and 40s, as these women usually approach dating with the goal of finding a partner they could make long-term plans with, move-in with, and (in some cases) marry. Younger men's (perceived) disinterest for settling down is, on the other hand, often seen as an advantage by women in their 50s (and some women in their 40s) who have tried the traditional long-lasting, co-residential relationship model and have seen their relationship fail, and who now want to find the kind of companionship that would allow them to maintain some level of independence.

Fertility, motherhood, and the question of children

When women elaborated on their dating experiences, the vast majority of them placed a lot of importance on issues related to fertility, motherhood, and childcare. Whether prospective partners had children or not, and/or whether these men wanted to have biological children one day were important selection criteria used by women to assess the longevity potential of their intimate relationships with men in general. However, regardless of their own age and regardless of their own parental status, the vast majority of women tended to perceive age-hypogamous intimate relationships as riskier than relationships with men their age with regards to their plans to become (or not) (step)mothers (again). The topic of younger men's parental status was most often presented as a negative point, as an obstacle that complicated participants' faith in their age-hypogamous

relationships' longevity. That said, the source of 30-something women's insecurities differed from that of women in their 40s and 50s.

First, most participants in their 30s (and a minority of women in their early 40s) were childless and hoping to eventually have children. Therefore, their plans to let their age-hypogamous intimate relationships develop (or not) was influenced, in part, by whether (or not) they perceived their younger partner to be interested and/or fit to become the father of their future children. For the majority of women in their 30s and some women in their early 40s, imagining a future with a younger man was perceived as involving a great load of risk with regards to their own ability to eventually have biological children. Many talked about being worried that they might miss their reproductive window while waiting for their younger partner to be ready for fatherhood.

Some women chose to take the risk and stay with their younger partner. For instance, at the time of her interview, 35-year-old Zoey had been dating her 24-year-old boyfriend Gavin for roughly three years. She shared that she was worried that she might miss her opportunity to have biological children, and she admitted wondering at times whether her boyfriend would then one day leave her to be with a woman who is still of reproductive age. However, she explained that he was worth the risk, and stated that she wished to stay with him:

I think I'd like to have kids and I think I would like to have them with Gavin. [...] We just sort of started to talk about that. But I would never pressure him into it. And I am, I guess, consciously making a decision right now to maybe never have kids?... Because I choose to be with him. But I know that he wants kids... So maybe those are questions for later on (small laugh)? But there are definitely a few concerns now.... Because I want kids and maybe when he is ready to have kids... there is a possibility that I won't be able to have kids? [...] Is he going to leave me for someone younger? [...] I don't know how it is going to affect our relationships in the coming few years. (Zoey, 35-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Some 30-something women neutralized their anxiety by telling themselves that if they were no longer physically capable of procreating by the time their partner was ready to become a father, they could always consider adoption. For instance, three months ago, 35-year-old Solange rekindled her intimate relationship with 27-year-old Matthew, a man she had known for several years and had previously dated when she was in her early 30s. During her interview, she reported that this time around, she was really committed to her relationship with him, and she said that she was now seriously considering spending her life with him. Knowing that there were other ways of having children allowed her to reconcile her dream of becoming a mother with her desire to spend her life with a man who she thought will not be ready to have children for a long time. However, having kids sooner than later would be her preference. In addition to allowing her to have them the traditional way, this would mean that her parents would likely be healthier and more apt to playing an active grand-parent role:

In my opinion, the only time the age difference matters is when it comes to children. Because in my case, almost all my friends have kids. [...] he said to me "I want children, but not right now". [...] I tell myself "Ok, 29-30 years old, usually men that age are alright, they've had time to do the things they wanted to experience". I look at those around me, it's always around 30 years old that my guy friends decided "Well, I'm ready to have kids". It must be that (small laugh). I'm going to be 37 at that point, you know. [...] It's been three or four months that we started seeing each other again. We take it a day at a time [...] sometimes, I tell myself "Yes, worst case I'll adopt when I'm 41 years old". But it's also about my energy level [...] And if I have kids, I would like for them to know my parents as grand-parents.

(Solange, 35-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

Other women in their 30s saw their age-hypogamous intimate relationships as having an inevitable end date because they thought their younger partners would never want to have children while

being in their 20s, and/or that their younger partners were simply too young to take on the responsibilities that come with parenthood. Reminiscing about her eight-month long relationship with 23-year-old (now) ex-boyfriend Marc, Louise described why she could not imagine a long-term relationship with him, even though *he* wanted to pursue the relationship and tried to convince her to have children with him. While having children in the near future was definitely a dream of hers, the 32-year-old woman was quite reluctant to take her relationship with him to the next level, considering his young age and how unprepared for parenthood she considered him to be:

He was 23 years old, the poor boy, no (small laugh). No, but he's sweet, I mean, we still see each other, and he's definitely a wonderful guy, no doubt. But no, I don't see myself having.... I felt like I was taking away his youth. I was under the impression that he wasn't aware of what it meant to have a child at 23-24 years old with an older woman. I felt that that he would be sacrificing his youth for something he wasn't fully aware of at the time. [...] it's way too much responsibility for a young guy, I think. I know that some do have children at that age. But I wasn't wrong at the end! He recently said that exact thing. He said "I realized afterwards that no, in the end' I had too many other things to experience first."
(Louise, 32-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

One should note that for the minority of women in their 30s who were not ready to think about children or who were simply not interested in ever becoming a mother, being with younger men was described as much easier than being with men their age or older. These women perceived younger men as less likely to put pressure on them to procreate, something that they felt was quite common among men their age or older. For instance, describing how she envisioned the future with her 23-year-old boyfriend, a man she had been dating for the past three months, 30-year old Jackie said:

*It's fun that he is younger; he won't put pressure on me to have kids (big laugh)! I have a girl friend, she's 31 and she just broke up with her boyfriend because of that, among other things; because he put a lot of pressure on her to have kids now, and she wasn't ready. And she wasn't sure she would be ready anytime soon.
(Jackie, 30-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)*

Women in their 40s and 50s, on the other hand, were generally reluctant to develop intimate relationships when they believed their younger partners were expecting them to have (more) children in the future. In fact, many of the women in their 40s and 50s talked about younger men as more likely than men their age or older to eventually leave them for a younger woman who could offer them biological children. Many of these women considered men's (perceived) desire for children to be such an important question that they purposely addressed that topic with younger men before they even accepted a first date or after only a few dates.

Most women over 40 described their younger partners' childless status as something that complicated their relationships. That said, many were still hoping that their age-hypogamous intimate relationship could last. Others, on the other hand, could hardly project themselves in the future with their younger partners because they thought it was only a matter of time before their younger partner realized they wanted to have children of their own. Among those who doubted a future with their younger partner was realistic, some preferred to keep things casual with younger men as a way for them to avoid what they saw as an inevitable heartbreak. Others chose to embark on a serious relationship knowing that they would have to break up sooner or later.

Whitney was one of those 40-something women who had fallen in love with some of her younger partners over the years, and who had tried developing long-lasting relationships with them. Unfortunately, those relationships never passed the test of time, and she reported having ended up

heartbroken each time. Based on her experience of dating men in their 20s and early 30s, she maintained that childless men in that age group have a hard time projecting themselves in the future with women her age because of the fertility issues older women can face. At the time of her interview, the 43-year-old woman was experiencing turbulence in her relationship with her 31-year-old partner — a man she had been dating for several months — and she felt he was about to break up with her, in part, because he wanted to have biological children one day and could not see himself having a family with her. Now quite disillusioned with the possibility of having a long-term, serious relationship with a younger man, she said:

*I think seven years younger is pretty much the limit [to build a serious relationship]. With my ex, the age gap was seven years... I feel like a difference of seven years, we can still connect, we can meet halfway. But otherwise.... And younger guys, they want kids. And personally, up until I was 38 years old, it wasn't so bad for me, but now, it's starting to get difficult to have kids.
(Whitney, 43-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)*

Some women in their 40s and 50s felt it was their moral responsibility to say no to younger men's propositions for serious relationships, or to eventually terminate their intimate relationships with younger men, even if their younger partners wanted to pursue the relationship and reported not thinking about having children anytime soon, if ever. These women explained that having children was one of the most beautiful things that could happen to someone, and they felt that by staying with their younger partners, they would be preventing them from experiencing it. These women seemed to believe that their own age and life experience made them better equipped to know what was best for their younger partners. While they presented breaking up as the responsible thing to do, contemplating ending their relationships so their partners could have biological children was quite difficult emotionally for those women who had become attached to their partners.

For instance, during her interview, 56-year-old Béatrice reported how throughout her relationship with Patrick, a man 16 years her junior, she kept trying to convince him to stop seeing her. She would often encourage him to try to find a woman his age so he could have children of his own. She explained that while she thought it was the most logical thing to do, they were too attached to one another to make the decision to call it quits definitively. They finally broke up a few months before her interview, after seven years of on-and-off dating. Reminiscing about how the question of children affected their relationship, she said:

I would tell him “Go on Réseau Contact [a dating website] because I want you to have kids. You want to have children.” He wanted kids, and I would tell him “I would much rather you had them; it’s the most beautiful thing that can happen to you in your life. And I don’t want to be in the way of that. Listen, I’m certainly getting attached, but it hurts me to know that you’re missing out on chances to meet a woman your age”. You know? So, I would send him off to see other women. [...] We got quite attached, despite the fact that I would tell him, “Of course, but you have to meet someone else to have kids! It makes no sense! And now, you’re in your 30s and you’re growing older and older”. And sometimes, he would tell me “There’s no rush, I’m giving myself until 40 to have kids”.
(Béatrice, 56-year-old, mother, divorced)

Finally, unlike 30-something women, many of the women in their 40s and 50s complained about younger men having young children. These women reported being reluctant to let their relationship develop if their younger partner had young children as they feared that they would be asked to play an active stepmother role to take on a portion of the childcare. Interestingly, while most participants assumed that men with young children would want them to play an active stepmother role, those who were mothers did not describe age-hypogamous intimate relationships as having the potential to alleviate some of *their own* childrearing burden.

Helene, a 53-year-old mother of four, explained how the idea of having to take on childcare responsibilities all over again, after having raised her own children, was a major turn off for her. She explained that regardless of the connection she felt with younger men, if they had young children, she would never consider anything more than casual sex with them. Talking about her current partner David, a 30-year-old man she started to see a few months ago, she explained that at first, she saw potential in their relationship. But that all changed when she learnt that he was the father of a six-month old. Since then, she made the decision to continue to see him, but only on a casual basis, for sexual purposes, and with clear intentions of never taking things to the next level:

*He said to me “You have an effect me on, there is something about your eyes, I’m under your spell. I’ve always wanted to have you, to date you”, etc. I thought this could work. But when I heard – after sleeping with him- that he had a six-month-old baby, I let him know: “We will never be together. I love my kids, I crawled around on the floor with them often enough! But now there’s more I want to experience in my life”. Ok, sexually, yes [we can see each other]. He can tell me whatever he wants, but I already warned him, “Don’t get attached to me, because you’re the one who’s going to get hurt”.
(Helene, 53-year-old, mother, divorced)*

In other words, most women in their 40s and 50s who were dating younger men with young children were not willing to offer their childrearing aptitudes ‘in exchange’ for younger men’s love and commitment, and they perceived their stance on that matter as a considerable obstacle to age-hypogamous intimate relationships’ longevity. Interestingly, while women in their 40s and 50s were quite vocal about the way dating a younger man with young children would inevitably mean that they would be expected to take on the stepmom role, those who were mothers were rather silent about the how dating a younger man could ease their own childcare responsibilities.

Women's depiction of the way children affect intimate relationships resonates with recent research on parenting and intimate relationships. Indeed, research shows that while men have increased the total time they devote to housework and child care over the last decades (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; McMahon, 1999; Sullivan, 2015), women still do most of the housework and child care. In fact, the gendered domestic division of labour usually intensifies when couples become parents (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Fox, 2009; Walzer, 1998). Other research shows that single fathers and single mothers face somewhat different realities when trying to re-partner. Indeed, men are less open than women to the idea of partnering with someone who is a parent (Goldscheider, Kaufman, & Sassler, 2009), and having underage children living at home has a different impact on men's and women's chances of marriage (Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006).

Considering that most women in this study perceived younger men as more energetic and in better physical shape than older men, one could have expected participants who had young children of their own to see younger men as having the energy needed to help them with their childcare responsibilities. These women could also have perceived younger childless men as having more time to help with childcare. However, participants who had children at home did not perceive age-hypogamous intimate relationships as facilitating the renegotiation of traditional gendered expectations regarding childrearing.

Women's fear of being pulled into a time/energy-consuming stepmother role and the silence of participants who were mothers with regards to how younger men could alleviate their own childrearing responsibilities suggest that women in this study perceived (step)parenting as a role that men could expect women to take on, but not the other way around. Based on these women's stories, it appears that the unconventional nature of age-hypogamous intimate relationships was not perceived as allowing them to resist the traditional gendered division of labour in heterosexual

couples where women are expected to take on the majority of the childcare responsibilities. In fact, they saw age-hypogamous intimate relationships as complicating an already unfair gender dynamic when it comes to childrearing.

The specter of fading beauty

When discussing how they imagined the future with their younger partners, a majority of women in their 30s and 40s (but only a minority of women in their 50s) mentioned experiencing some insecurities regarding their ability to keep their partners physically interested in the long run. Although most women did manage, to some extent, to temporarily neutralize ageist conceptions of women's value as intimate partners by focusing on other qualities they possessed (such as their sexual skills), constantly resisting the ageist linear conception of women's beauty and worth was not always an easy task. In fact, while most women reported feeling rather confident in their own skin at the moment and described themselves as more body confident than they were in their younger years, they also expressed some anxiety regarding the way their bodies would age and whether their younger partners would still find them attractive when they are older. According to most women in their 30s and 40s, setting foot on the age-hypogamous dating field tended to create or exacerbate existing insecurities regarding their own physical appearance, more specifically regarding their ability to maintain younger men's physical attraction for them over time.

First, most of the women I interviewed made statements that indicated that they had internalized the idea that female beauty is negatively correlated with age. For instance, a close look at the way 31-year-old Katarina discussed how she envisioned the future with younger partners revealed how difficult it can be for women to resist the ageist conception of women's beauty as intimate partners. Although she tried to nuance her statement by adding that some women can manage through

dieting and exercising to remain as physically attractive as they age, her comments tended to support the traditional linear conception of female beauty:

*When I'm like 45 and I'll start to be wrinkled and less toned [...] if he's 12 years younger – let's say I'm 42 and he's 30 – if he wants to, he can sleep with a 25-year-old woman [...]. Obviously at 42 we're no longer as pretty as we were at 24. Although maybe not; there are some women that are still very beautiful... I eat well, I work out, (laugh) so it shouldn't be too terrible (laugh), but... it's a bit scary to think of him surrounded by women that young.
(Katarina, 31-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)*

However, women in their 30s and 40s were much more likely than women in their 50s to report feelings of anxiety regarding whether their younger intimate partners would eventually leave them for a younger, “prettier” woman. For instance, 32-year old Becky — who at the time of her interview had just broken up with her 23-year-old boyfriend after three years of dating — explained how being with a younger man intensified the insecurities she already had about her body. Comparing herself to her boyfriend’s female friends made her feel insecure about her own physical attractiveness, and therefore about the longevity potential of her relationship. Reminiscing about her relationship with Brandon, she said:

*Sometimes I would compare myself to his female friends. [...] I would try encouraging myself: “For a woman my age, I'm really not that bad”. It's still difficult. It's hard because for me to compete with 23-year-old girls' bodies, I'm like “Damn, I can't win!” [...] Obviously with Jeremy, that feeling of insecurity is more present [than with my older partners], because I've started comparing myself to women that aren't my age. Before, I would compare myself to women my age, and now I'm comparing myself with 23-year-olds. That's what is different.
(Becky, 32-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)*

Although most of these women did not talk about a debilitating fear that would impede their intentions of pursuing their age-hypogamous intimate relationships, they admitted that the thought of one day being replaced by a younger woman, once the signs of aging on their bodies become more obvious, did indeed come to mind from time to time and created some anxiety. Until recently, 35-year-old Natalie was in a serious relationship with Fabien, a man eight years her junior, and that relationship lasted for roughly two years. Reminiscing about the way she envisioned the future of her relationship when she was dating him, she explained that the fact that he was quite physically attractive, combined with the fact that she was considerably older than his female friends made her very insecure about herself. Natalie revealed that during her relationship with Fabien, she would often wonder whether she would be able to keep her boyfriend sexually attracted to her as she gets older and as the signs of aging become more visible on her body. She said:

I was sure he was going to dump me one day for a younger girl, a girl his age or younger [...] Because I was telling myself “Ah well, that’s it! I’m like a lame old lady!” I was afraid. I look young at the moment, but it won’t last forever. At some point, it’s going to show”. I was scared... I’m dreading the day that it will start to show [that I’m older]. I’m used to looking young. One day, I won’t look young anymore. It might be weird. I was scared that at some point it would start showing too much that I was older than him, and then that he wouldn’t like that.... That he would want “fresh meat”.

(Natalie, 35-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Some of the women in their 30s and 40s confessed that insecurities related to their physical appearance and ability to maintain their younger partners’ interest physically could at times be overwhelming. Some of them expressed much reluctance at the idea of building a long-lasting age-hypogamous intimate relationship, in part, because of that. 40-year-old Gayle was one of those women who was struggling considerably with the idea of her body aging and potentially no longer

being as attractive in the eyes of her younger partner. Describing the type of thoughts that came to mind when she was thinking of the future with her previous boyfriend, a man 14 years her junior who she dated for several months until very recently, she said:

I was insecure during my relationship with him! I would tell myself “Let’s just say I’m going to be 50 years old, he’s going to be....” You know, I was always calculating the ages. Let’s just say it’s going well and I get to 50, and he’s going to be 36 years old. Anything can happen! All of a sudden, he might not desire me anymore because I’m too old. He might realize I’m too old, and he’ll go find a younger woman after all... You know, there’s no guarantee! So I would think a lot about that. I would say to myself “Naaaah... Maybe it won’t work” or “My daughters are growing up – and maybe all of a sudden, one day, he’ll fall in love with one of my daughters?” (small laugh) You understand? It can happen? And my daughter falls in love with him, and they decide to be together, and he just leaves me there?! You know, I would think of ALL (emphasis) of that, those concerns. (Gayle, 40-year-old, mother, divorced)

While the question of whether or not their younger partners would remain physically attracted to them once the physical signs of aging became more evident was a theme that mostly affected women in their 30s and 40s, there were still some women over 50 who talked about their perceived declining attractiveness as an obstacle to their age-hypogamous relationships’ longevity. Edith, a 60-year-old woman whose recent dating history included a few men in their 20s and 30s, reported that she could not help but question whether it was normal for her partners to be physically attracted to a woman her age. She explained that she was dating her younger partners with little expectations regarding the future of their relationships, in part, because she thought that they might one day choose to be with a younger, more attractive woman. Describing herself as embracing a “living in the moment” attitude, she addressed with serenity the possibility of seeing her relationship end in the future. She said:

You're constantly thinking "Ok, it's almost abnormal for men to be attracted [to women my age]", especially because I'm so much older than them; not like five years older, I'm like decades older than them! [There is a risk] that they will meet somebody that is more attractive, or compatible... and that would be completely normal. It's not something I worry about because I don't view them as... I wouldn't be devastated if any of them had, you know, somebody else. I would find it very natural. But I think it's an inherent risk when you're the older person. Especially [for older women] because [...] if there's a big age difference, it's usually the man that's much older. Although in recent years it's changing, thankfully... but I think that would be a risk.

(Edith, 60-year-old, mother, separated)

While Edith felt that her insecurities were exacerbated by the fact that the age difference between her and her intimate partners was rather large, many women who were dating men closer in age also expressed similar fears or insecurities. For instance, 44-year-old Holly explained how insecurities related to her physical attractiveness were suddenly rather present thoughts in her mind now that she was dating— for the first time — a younger man, even though her partner was only three years younger. Indeed, considering that her previous boyfriend— the father of her child who she dated for six years— was 10 years older than her, 41-year-old Owen appeared rather young in her eyes. She talked about being with a younger man as “a privilege that could be taken away at any moment, and that I don't deserve”. Most of her insecurities regarding her relationship's longevity potential lied in her internalized ageist conceptions of female beauty and women's worth as intimate partners:

I'm less confident about certain things and more confident about others. The part I'm less confident about, it's that all of a sudden, he can choose to switch for a 30-year-old body. It's reasonable and realistic. He can do that next week if he wants. And I don't have a counter offer for him. I don't keep a spare body in the closet. I only have the one I have.

(Holly, 44-year-old, mother, divorced)

Younger men's (im)maturity

A majority of women in their 30s and a large portion of women in their 40s reported that one of the main obstacles affecting their age-hypogamous intimate relationships' longevity potential was their younger partners' "level of maturity". Many of these women worried that their younger partners might not be over their exploration or "partying" phase. Many also complained that their partners had not acquired the qualities and skills needed to be a great life companion. The subtext of these women's worries and complaints was that being with a younger man at times felt like they had to teach their partners how to be a responsible, reliable, and emotionally intelligent partner, and many wondered whether one could really fast-forward the maturity development process.

First, many women in their 30s depicted younger men as still in their "partying phase", which meant that they were still interested in going out with their friends, consuming large quantities of alcohol, and staying up late at night on a regular basis. These women reported being passed that stage in their lives, and many believed that being with a younger man long term would mean silently suffering from their partner's lifestyle, or speaking up and feeling like they were controlling their partners. For instance, throughout her 30s, 37-year-old Fiona had had several younger intimate partners, which most often remained casual partners in her eyes. She mentioned that while she preferred younger men as sex partners, she tended to perceive her age-hypogamous intimate relationships as temporary, in part, because she felt that her younger partners were still in their partying phase and had drinking problems.

We aren't at the same place in life. Like I was saying, the majority of them either aren't done partying or they want kids. While I've gone on to another phase. Personally, it's been two years since I stopped drinking. [...] I'll go out to clubs once or twice a year [...] but when I do, it's to go dance, not to drink. But for younger men, that's not it. [...] For them, it's to go get drunk. That's why I don't dare get too committed [with younger men].

(Fiona, 37-year-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)

Others felt that even if their younger partners presented themselves as being over that phase, their partners might one day feel like they missed out on their youth and leave them so they could experience the exciting adventures commonly associated with young adulthood. Some women, like Annabelle, believed it was not only unrealistic to expect younger men to skip that life stage, but also unfair to them. Explained why she had never been able to imagine developing a long-lasting relationship with any of the two younger men she has had recently dated, the 32-year-old woman said:

There's definitely certain phases in life, certain stages in life, and I don't think it's good for a 22-year-old guy to get involved in a stable, long term relationship with a 32-year-old woman, because he's going to need to get life experiences, he needs to date, he needs to meet girls, he needs to go travel, he needs to live lots of adventures. So, if he deprives himself of that now, he's just going to explode one day in like four or five years, and the relationship will end because he's going to want to go explore who he is, and his single life, and his freedom, you know.

(Annabelle, 32-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

Many women in their 30s and 40s also perceived younger men as lacking the relational skills needed to create a strong, long-lasting relationship, such as thoughtfulness, respect, communication skills, etc. or the coping skills needed to deal with their own personal struggles.

While many women chose to keep dating their younger partners despite these negative points,

younger men's (perceived) limited relational and coping skills were seen as complicating their efforts to make the relationship succeed. For instance, 46-year-old Zara reported that while at a certain point in time she was interested in seeing her relationship with Mathieu, a 38-year-old man she had been dating for roughly two years, become more serious, she had since changed her mind. Explaining her change of heart, she pointed out Mathieu's tendency to be self-centered and unreliable, a trait she attributed to his age. Comparing him and other men his age to what she called "adulcents", she elaborated on why she can no longer realistically imagine a serious, long-term intimate relationship with younger men:

*That's what discourages me from dating someone younger: there are a lot of men in their 30s and early 40s that are just big teenagers. Personally, I don't want to have a teenager in my life right now. I've already got one at home that doesn't empty the dishwasher! You know (laugh)! I call them "adulcents". Mathieu, for example, was supposed to arrive at 11pm and he showed up at 12:15 because he was playing guitar. Like "Fuck! MATHIEU?! I have like 4 hours to see you during the week. I've got laundry, kids, things to do, I've got to go buy school supplies, and you show up an hour and 15 minutes late because you were playing guitar?!" [...] It's like he's very concentrated on his own needs, his own desires.
(Zara, 46-year-old, mother, separated)*

Similarly, elaborating on her intimate relationship with 25-year-old Carter — a man she has been dating in a non-exclusive way for more than two years — 32-year-old Ashley described her partner's irresponsible ways as one of the reasons why a part of her could not imagine spending her life with him. She repeated many times that while she was very emotionally attached to him and wanted to keep dating him for a while, she also felt that when she is ready to settle down, it would be better for her to find someone closer to her age.

I look at him and I'm like "Oh my god! you're so irresponsible! You can't even pay your bills! Like I don't want to, like, share the responsibility of a kid's life with you. Like, no way!". Also sometimes I don't feel like I'M (emphasis) ready to have that responsibility, right (small laugh)? [...] I'm just like, "You are so not there", you know what I mean? [...] I do think my relationship with Carter is very, like, committed and loving, like, we care a lot about each other. But it's not long-term thinking.

(Ashley, 32-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

Many women in their 30s and 40s perceived their younger partners as still being in a place where they are unsure of who they will become or where they are going in life. These participants thought of the 20s (and in some cases, the early 30s) as a crucial moment in life where people learn who they are and the path they want to take in life. Some of them were reluctant to imagine staying long-term with their younger partners because they did not want to fall into the mentor or psychologist role. For instance, 32-year-old Louise had had several 20-something intimate partners since she became single two years ago. While some of her age-hypogamous intimate relationships were short-lived flings, others had been long-term committed relationships that lasted for several months. However, she explained that most often, she felt that men in their 20s had not fully developed what she called “emotional maturity” and were still in that life stage where they are trying to discover who they are and what life path they want to take. This contributed to her perceptions of age-hypogamous intimate relationships as having an expiration date:

The age difference always bothers me, except for short term dating. I don't consider my relationships with younger men as potentially developing further. I know what it's like to be under 25 years old, and I'm not interested in following along during that period of self-reflection that your 20s bring. I don't ever think I'll meet someone 5 years younger than me that I'll want to spend my daily life with. But short term, why not!

(Louise, 32-year-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

Reminiscing about her relationship with her ex-boyfriend Fabien — a man eight years her junior who she dated for roughly two years until recently — 35-year-old Natalie reported that she felt like he was constantly changing his mind with regards to his life goals and plans and with regards to the kind of person he thought he wanted to be. Like many other participants who described the 20s as a life stage where one has to discover who they are and what lifepath they want to take, Natalie associated her ex-boyfriend's indecisive nature with his young age. She explained that, at the time, a part of her wanted to imagine a long-lasting relationship with him, but this particular trait made planning the future with him quite challenging:

Since he was someone doing a lot of soul-searching, who questioned himself often, it scared me.... It's always a bit unpredictable, you don't know in which direction it's going. So there's maybe the effect of age in there. Like, how long will it take, when will he know the kind of person he is? What does he want to do? I've always questioned who I was, but the last few years I've managed to get my shit together. But it hasn't been that long. [...] It's exhausting being with someone who is also like that. How long is it going to last, that period where he redefines who he is every second like that?

(Natalie, 35-year-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Women's fear of being stigmatized

As discussed previously, most women in this study perceived society as being much more disapproving of age-hypogamous intimate relationships than age-hypergamous intimate relationships. The majority of them perceived the media as depicting older women who date younger men in a much more negative light than men who date younger women, and a majority of them did not appreciate the way that 'cougars' were commonly depicted. Furthermore, most participants reported having themselves experienced some teasing or disparaging comments because of their non-traditional choice of partners. However, only a minority of women talked

about the stigma associated with age-hypogamous intimate relationships as a potential obstacle to the longevity of their relationships with younger men. In fact, when they heard negative comments, most women in this study perceived those situations as isolated events, as temporary annoyances that would not stop them from dating younger men.

Indeed, while most women experienced some form of negative reactions at some point because of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships, only a minority of women saw the risk of being criticized or judged for their unconventional choices of partner as an obstacle to the longevity of age-hypogamous intimate relationships. In fact, many women reported feeling supported by most of their loved ones in their decision to date younger men. For instance, during her interview, 33-year-old Yasmina mentioned that her friends and family were all aware that her last three boyfriends had been considerably younger than her — all of them being six to eight years younger than her — and she said that she never felt discouraged from pursuing long-term relationships with any of them. She even reported that her mother once told her age-hypogamous intimate relationships were the best choice women could do for themselves, which encouraged her to believe in the durability of her age-hypogamous intimate relationships. Now in a committed relationship with Joel, a 26-year-old man, she said:

*It never bothered anyone around me. My mother even said once, when I was with [my ex-boyfriend] Leo, when I told her he was younger than me, she said “Younger men are the best ones” (laugh). She told me that, and it stuck with me. It never bothered my family never, it never bothered my friends. Joel’s family is not bothered by the age difference either. It doesn’t change anything, really. My mom says: “Love doesn’t care about age; the age difference doesn’t matter”. I never felt judged because of my relationships.
(Yasmina, 33-years-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)*

The participants who were most likely to mention stigma as a potential obstacle to developing a long-term relationship with their younger partner were often those whose partners were far younger than them. Some of the women who were dating men 15 or more years younger than them admitted being at times uncomfortable with demonstrating affection with their younger partners in public as they thought strangers would stare and judge them. Others mentioned that they suspected that their younger partners would not be comfortable with presenting them to their friends because of the large age difference. However, it is worth noting that many women who dated men who were much younger than them did *not* describe the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationship as influenced by stigma.

Reminiscing about her past relationship with a 21-year-old man, 48-year-old Joanna explained how the fact that she was too ashamed to be seen in public with him was a good indicator that this relationship could never work. However, the fear of being judged for her decision to date a man two decades younger than her was not the only factor that had influenced her assessment. She also revealed that they had nothing in common, and that their connection was in fact purely sexual. She explained how the visibility of the age difference influenced her ability to imagine a long-lasting relationship with her younger partners:

There is a difference between a man who's only two years younger, and a man who's 20 years younger, let's be real. [...] But the 21-year-old guy, I couldn't walk on the street with him. What others could think of me, I couldn't handle it. Even if I looked younger [than my age]. [But] Sebastien, we walked on the street together; we had a 10-year difference. Nobody could tell [I was older than him], you know. But [the guy who was] 21 years old! [...] I was like "Don't hold my hand!" (laugh) (Joanna, 48-years-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

For some of the women who were dating much younger men, part of the challenge they faced when trying to develop their relationship was related to their younger partner's family's disapproval of the relationship. For instance, until recently, 52-year-old Tania was in a committed relationship with Daniel, a man 21 years her junior. She mentioned that, during her three-year relationship, they were both quite emotionally attached and committed to one another, and that she hoped that their relationship would last. However, the fact that her partner's parents were opposed to the relationship made it more difficult for her to believe that her age-hypogamous relationship could survive the test of time. Indeed, her boyfriend's parents would often encourage him to leave her. While she was able to continue her relationship for a few years, that negative energy was perceived by Tania as complicating her efforts to build a long-lasting relationship with her younger partner. Tania's story also highlights how part of the negative reactions she experienced while dating her younger boyfriend was related to the fact that she was perceived as preventing him from having children:

*His parents' opinion was something that mattered a lot to him. [...] At some point, his dad asked him if he was willing to pursue the relationship with me, saying "You know that it won't last, you will never have children with her". My boyfriend really cared about what his parents thought of him. He would sometimes say that he couldn't do this to his parents [not having children]. [...] I can't believe how much he let his parents guide his decisions, how he couldn't make life decisions without his parents' approval. I would tell him "Your parents won't always be around. If you marry someone you don't really love" ... I was trying to make him understand, but... So we would avoid talking about those topics. We chose to enjoy the time we had together without thinking too far ahead.
(Tania, 52-years-old, no children, divorced)*

However, one should note that there were some women who were dating men closer to them in age who also felt that their age-hypogamous intimate relationships was not welcome by all, and

who saw stigma as an obstacle that could prevent them from building a long-lasting relationship with their younger partner. For instance, 31-year old Katarina was reluctant to meet her new partner's family as she anticipated them to be quite opposed to their son dating a woman 10 years his senior. While she revealed that she could see herself falling in love with the 21-year-old man she had been dating for a month, she also mentioned trying not to get too emotionally attached yet, as she was afraid that her relationship would not be welcome by her partner's family. While an age gap of 10 years might not be as impressive as one of 20 or 30 years, one should keep in mind that Katarina was only 31 years-old:

I can't tell whether our relationship will last a long time, or whether it will end soon. [It could work] because we each have what the other is looking for. We were talking about it the other day, and we said that we could really fall in love with each other. [...] I'm trying not to give in. And I think the age difference doesn't help. [...] [I'm afraid of] not being accepted. [...] You know, his mother comes from another culture, she's really, like, her sons, they mean everything to her! So I'm not sure she would be happy.

(Katarina, 31-years-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)

Overall, similar to previous studies on women's (and men's) experience of age-hypogamous marital unions (Proulx et al., 2006; Warren, 1996), most of the women in this study perceived society to be more disapproving of age-hypogamous intimate relationships than relationships where the man is older, and most participants reported that they had face, at some point, negative or humorous comments regarding their unconventional dating choices. However, only a minority of women reported that people's negative reactions towards age-hypogamous intimate relationships was a deterrent to pursuing long-term intimate relationships with younger men. The women who were most likely to perceive stigma as an obstacle to the longevity of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships were often those who were dating much younger men. In fact,

most women considered negative reactions as temporary nuisances they could easily manage and that would not prevent them from pursuing their relationships with younger men, if they wished to do so.

Men's socioeconomic status

Before ending this chapter, it is important to note that, unlike what one could have expected given social exchange or evolutionary theories, only a minority of women brought up younger men's socioeconomic status as something that could be an obstacle to the longevity of their intimate relationships. Younger women were neither more nor less likely to focus on that issue. Indeed, when asked open-ended questions such as "How does the age difference influence the way you see the future with him?" or "If you were to imagine a long-term relationship with him, would there be any risks or benefits that you associate to his age?", very few talked about a man's income, social status or occupation. Even when women were asked direct questions about the financial dynamic within age-hypogamous intimate relationships, only a minority of women talked about men's income or socioeconomic status as something that they believed could potentially affect the durability of their relationships with younger men.

However, it is important to note that it is not that women did not see differences between older men and younger men when it came to the question of money, or that they did not care at all about a men's financial situation. In fact, many pointed out that often, their younger partners did not have much money they could spend on leisure. Many reported being somewhat disappointed to know that their younger partner could not afford to travel with them or take them out to upscale restaurants. But for the vast majority of women in this study, this aspect of dating younger men was not presented as something that could prevent them from pursuing their age-hypogamous intimate relationships, if they felt that they had a connection with their younger partners.

For instance, 36-year-old Uma had dated, on a casual basis, several men in their early and mid-20s in the last few years and reported feeling more attracted to younger men than men her age. She explained that the fact that her younger partners most often did not have that much extra money they could spend on dates was something that she considered to be annoying, especially since she was also currently on a tight budget. However, she did not consider this to be important enough for her to put an end to a relationship, if the relationship is going well and makes her happy:

*[The money issue], that's something that annoys me. You try to do activities with younger men, but they don't have money. Well, I don't have that much money either. My situation is better now. But, what I'm trying to say is that I find it somewhat disappointing not to do activities with them because they are too tight with money. But that, that wouldn't prevent me from being in a relationship with someone.
(Uma, 36-years-old, no children, never married and never in a CLU)*

Some women pointed out that income disparity between partners can be a source of conflict, regardless of whether it is the man or the woman who make more money than the other one. For instance, 43-year-old Yvonne reported that the fact that some of her younger partners did not have much money was something that she considered to be an obstacle for the longevity of those relationships. However, she also found it difficult when she dated affluent men, because she could not afford to do the activities they wanted to do, but was uncomfortable with the idea of having a man take on most of the financial burden:

When you have flings with younger men, it doesn't matter that he doesn't have money. It's more when it comes to long-term relationships that it can become a problem. Obviously, men who are slightly older, generally, they are at a point in their lives where their finance are in check, and some of them are really well off. But THAT, that can create other problems as well! [...] I'm only middle-class, you know. It's tough to handle then [...]. Unless I always let him pay for me. But

do I really want him to always pay for me? Where he wants to go, that's not necessarily where I want to go.

(Yvonne, 43-years-old, mother, never married but previously in a CLU)

While most women did not talk about a man's socioeconomic status as an important criterion that allowed them to assess whether they could envision themselves in a long-term relationship with their younger partners, there were some who did perceive younger men's lack of financial resources as an obstacle to their relationships' longevity. For instance, while she dated some of her younger partners for several months, 32-year-old Louise reported preferring men her age or older for long-term relationships, in part, because they were more likely to be financially established, which she saw as a requirement for starting a family. Comparing her previous younger partners to a recent older man she dated for a while, she said:

That 38-year-old man, he was well established, he had his own house, in this fancy neighborhood, with the pool and all. Of course, it's easier to imagine a future family with him. The main advantage [of an older man], I would say, is that he is financially stable, versus the younger guy who is still trying to figure out where he's going.

(Louise, 32-years-old, no children, never married but previously in a CLU)

The results presented here resonate with previous research indicating that middle-aged women do not consider a man's socioeconomic status to be among the main criteria they use to assess a prospective partner's desirability. Indeed, Levesque and Caron (2004) found that when presented with an open-ended question regarding the characteristics they look for in a man, very few middle-aged women (aged 35-50 years old) would mention a man's income or education as important criteria. Instead, these women most often mentioned qualities such as "sense of humor", "respectful of her independence", "honesty", "respect for oneself and others", and "no smokers,

heavy drinkers, or drug users”. Similarly, Montenegro (2003) found that when asked to mention the most important qualities they sought in a dating partner, the most common answers from single women aged 40-69 provided were “personality, sense of humor” (reported by 70 percent of women), “common interests” (53 percent of women), “moral/religious values” (39 percent of women), and “intelligence” (38 percent of women). What this current study showed that is that even when it comes to intimate relationships where women are older than their partners, middle-aged women rarely perceived younger men’s socioeconomic status as an obstacle to the development of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships.

Conclusion

The results presented here show that when it comes to assessing their age-hypogamous intimate relationships’ longevity potential, a large portion of women’s doubts or insecurities stem from the traditional conception of women’s worth as intimate partners as associated with their physical attractiveness and their reproductive capacities/childrearing aptitudes. These were not, however, the only factors that women considered when reflecting on whether they saw their age-hypogamous intimate relationships as likely to last. Many women — especially those in their 30s and 40s — worried that their younger partners would not be ready to settle down when they were, and that younger men might not be mature enough to be great life companions.

Nonetheless, these results showed that women in their 50s were much less preoccupied with whether or not their age-hypogamous intimate relationship would last and perceived fewer obstacles to the longevity of their relationships. Indeed, most women in their 50s exuded a carefree attitude when discussing the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships, and did not seem to be too worried as to where their relationships with younger men would go. I explain the differences between younger and older participants by the fact that they differed with

regards to (a) their dating goals, specifically whether they wished to eventually move in with/marry their partner and to have (more) children, and (b) their perceptions of alternative dating options.

First, one of the main factors that influenced the way women talked about the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships were their dating goals. As mentioned earlier, younger and older participants in this study approached dating with very different goals, which I argue partly explains why women in their 50s seemed less preoccupied with how the age difference could affect their relationships' longevity. Indeed, during their interview, most women in their 30s and a considerable portion of women in their 40s stated that they were hoping to eventually meet a man they could settle down with. The majority of women in their 30s (and some women in their early 40s) were also hoping to have the chance to have (biological) children. On the other hand, many women in their 40s and the vast majority of women in their 50s were quite reluctant or completely opposed to taking (once again) the traditional path towards cohabitation/marriage, and the majority of them were no longer interested in or physically capable of having (more) children.

I contend the fact that they were looking for relationships in which both partners kept a certain level of emotional, financial, and housing independence, and the fact that they were no longer looking to find a suitable father for their children allowed women in their 50s (and some in their 40s) to be more flexible in terms of the traits they thought were necessary in a partner. Indeed, I suggest that because they were not looking for a relationship that would lead to cohabitation/marriage, financial solidarity, and childbearing, these women perceived the stakes associated with the success of their relationships to be rather low and felt that there was therefore no point in stressing over the future and imagining worst-case scenarios. These results suggest that not wanting to settle down and start a family frees women from some of the anxiety associated

with choosing the unconventional relationship form that is age-hypogamous intimate relationships and allows women to be less preoccupied with the longevity potential of their relationships.

However, it is important to reiterate that the women in their 50s who participated in this study were not entirely unaffected by the age difference and the cultural imperative for women to evaluate their value with their reproductive/childrearing capacities. Indeed, many of them talked about being hesitant to let their intimate relationships develop when they perceived their younger partners as wanting to have children of their own, or as expecting women to take on the role of the stepmother (if their younger partners were fathers of young children). Overall, it appears that women in their 50s, like women in their 30s and 40s, see their dating opportunities as constrained by their reproductive capacities and the gendered expectations regarding childrearing.

Second, I argue that, in order to fully understand why older and younger participants differed with regards to their assessment of their relationships' longevity potential, one should also consider women's perceptions of their dating alternatives. As mentioned in the chapter on relationship formation (chapter 3), many of the women in their 40s and 50s perceived most men their age as preferring younger women, an assessment that is supported by empirical evidence (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Buunk et al., 2001; Conway et al., 2015; Pixley et al., 2007; Skopek et al., 2011; South, 1991). Arguably, in order to successfully find a partner, some women in their 50s might decide to adjust their selection criteria and become more tolerant of certain traits in men — traits that younger women can more easily afford not to tolerate because they have more dating options available.

However, before drawing the conclusion that older women are merely victims of men's ageist conceptions of women's worth as intimate partners, I contend that we must also consider these

women's perceptions of the desirability of single men their age. In fact, a majority of women in their 40s and 50s reported being quite dissatisfied with the quality of single men in their age range (for many reasons). In fact, Levesque and Caron (2004) also found that when middle-aged women perceive the dating market as providing limited options for them, they usually criticize the *quality* of available men, and not so much the quantity of available men. Arguably, women in their 50s were less preoccupied with how the age gap could impact the durability of their intimate relationships because they perceived their other options (i.e. dating men their age or older) as much less interesting.

Before ending this chapter, one should also note that, unlike what one could have expected considering social exchange or evolutionary theories, very few women brought up younger men's financial situation or occupational prestige as considerations that affected their assessment of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships' longevity potential. However, one should note that this study was conducted among women who were not cohabitating with nor married to their younger partners. Since cohabitation and marriage generally involve a considerable amount of economic/material resource sharing (Belleau, 2011), it is possible that men's income or socioeconomic status would be more salient in women's assessment of their relationships' durability if they were to cohabit with or be married to their younger partners. It is also possible that women were uncomfortable to admit that they placed much importance on a man's financial situation, and that they considered love to 'have a price'.

One should also note that only a minority of women talked about stigma as something that could prevent them from developing a long-lasting relationship with their younger partners, or at least complicate their ability to do so. This is surprising considering that most of the participants talked about society as being quite disapproving of age-hypogamous intimate relationships, and that most

of them reported having experienced teasing and/or negative remarks because of their unconventional choices of partners. One should be careful when reflecting on what this finding means. This does not mean that women were not negatively affected by the stigma attached to age-hypogamous intimate relationships. Indeed, as discussed previously, many women reported annoyance with the type of assumptions people could have about them because they were dating younger men. As previously discussed, most participants were careful not to portray themselves as having purposely sought younger intimate partners, which allowed them to neutralize to some extent potential negative interpretations of their dating choices. What the findings presented here mean is that, when women reflect on how they envision their relationship with younger men evolving, most of them do not identify stigma as something that affects their decision to pursue their relationship or not, or as a factor that could complicate their ability to develop a long-term, serious relationship with their younger partners.

CONCLUSION

In the past two decades, there has been increasing discussion in the media about women who date younger men (Lawton & Callister, 2010). The cultural fascination with women who date younger men, I have argued, stems from the common perceptions of these women as challenging many social norms regarding appropriate dating and sexual behavior for (older) women, and as resisting traditional assumptions about women's value as intimate partners. Indeed, by coupling with younger men, these women challenge the common notion that, as they age, women lose value on the dating market (more so than men do) (Caron, 2005; Del Rosso, 2017; Frith et al., 2005; Hurd Clarke, 2002; Lichtenstein, 2012; Travis et al., 2000; Wolf, 1991). They also challenge the widespread belief that presenting oneself as desiring and desirable is more acceptable for the young, physically 'attractive', childless woman (Friedman et al., 1998; Montemurro & Siefken, 2012).

Furthermore, commonly depicted in the media as women who actively seek younger male partners, approaching younger men and blatantly seducing them (Aoun, 2013; Collard, 2012; Lawton & Callister, 2010; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014), these women are also imagined as disregarding the conventional, culture-level dating script, such as the prescription for women to wait to be chosen by men and to limit themselves to reacting to men's propositions (Eaton & Rose, 2011; England et al., 2008; Kurth et al., 2000; Lamont, 2014; Laner & Ventrone, 1998; Paynter & Leaper, 2016). These women are also often imagined as sexually assertive and highly desiring women, therefore challenging some of the main pillars of the traditional, culture-level script for (heterosexual) sex (Fahs, 2011; Kurth et al., 2000; Lang et al., 2011; Morokoff, 2000; Smolak et al., 2014; Travis et al., 2000). Finally, because they are commonly depicted as engaging in short-term, casual intimate

relationships without much interest for long-term commitment (Kaklamanidou, 2012; Tally, 2006), women who date younger men are imagined as challenging the “ideology of marriage and family” (DePaulo & Morris, 2005).

While previous studies had provided a (partial) portrait of the prevalence of age-hypogamous intimate relationships and of the sociodemographic characteristics of women who tend to choose younger male partners, there was very little empirical data on women’s experiences of age-hypogamous intimate relationships. In fact, it was unclear how real women compared to cultural representations of ‘cougars’ commonly found in the media. It was unclear to what extent these women actually deviated from the gendered prescriptions regarding appropriate behavior for women found in the traditional, culture-level dating and sexual scripts and to what extent women dating younger men resisted sexist and ageist conceptions of women’s worth on the dating market. Therefore, I investigated Canadian, middle-aged women’s experiences with age hypogamy in the heterosexual dating context with the intent of contributing to filling this gap.

I found that women who date younger men often reproduce rather conventional gendered expectations for women’s behavior during the relationship formation process. Specifically, analyzing the way women described how their age-hypogamous intimate relationships began, I found that unlike the common cultural representation of ‘cougars’ found in the media, very few women depicted themselves as seductresses who actively searched for and pursued younger men, with younger men passively waiting to be courted. In fact, many women in this study indicated that they met younger men out of pure coincidence and described the beginning of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships as something that “just happened”. A large portion of women — mostly women in their 40s and 50s — also presented younger men as the ones who actively

pursued them and depicted men their age or older as indirectly pushing them towards younger men.

While many women reproduced rather conventional gendered expectations for female behavior during the relationship formation process, they also challenged many aspects of the traditional, gender-typed script for (heterosexual) sex in their sexual interactions with younger men. Indeed, elaborating on the sexual interplay in age-hypogamous intimate relationships, these women described themselves as highly desiring, as easily capable of expressing their sexual desires and preferred sexual practices, as enjoying taking the lead during sexual interactions, as comfortable in their own skin, and as unashamed to request that their sexual pleasure be attended to. In fact, they presented themselves as sexually empowered women, and they explained their dating choices as motivated, in part, by their desire to have partners who appreciate sexually assertive women with strong sex drives and who possess the qualities required to allow women to reach maximal pleasure during sex.

Indeed, age-hypogamous intimate relationships were depicted as a context where women were encouraged to present themselves as highly desiring and sexually assertive and where women could more easily ensure that their pleasure be attended to. However, unlike women in their 30s, many women in their 40s and 50s thought that many younger men — most often men in their 20s or early 30s — fetishized older women. These women often felt like many younger men approaching them were doing so because they were hoping to fulfill a fantasy. While many women over 40 seemed to appreciate thinking that younger men fantasized about them, they also reported feeling the need to be cautious with whose propositions to accept. These women wanted to avoid younger men who were trying to “use” older women solely to fulfill their fantasy, without any consideration for women’s desires or expectations. This shows, I argued, that gendered power

dynamics influencing heterosexual sex are not automatically evacuated simply because women are the oldest in the relationship.

Ironically, while they depicted themselves as sexually empowered women, a large portion of women — especially those in their 40s and 50s — also tended to emphasize how much younger men desired them and how their partners were the ones who initially chose them when confronted to humorous or disparaging comments. In doing so, these women inadvertently reproduced the idea that the acceptability of women's sexuality is first and foremost defined by whether or not men find them desirable, that women's right to present themselves as sexual beings is dependent on their ability to trigger sexual desire in men. In fact, navigating the sexist and ageist conceptions of women's sexuality appeared to be particularly challenging for women in their 40s and 50s, as they often seemed torn between their desire to present themselves as the sexually empowered women they imagine themselves to be and their desire to avoid being read as sexual deviants.

I have argued that the “younger men as pursuers” rhetoric allowed women to neutralize potential accusations of deviant behavior in many ways. In addition to providing women with the seal of approval that being the object of male desire awards, this discourse allowed women to re-inscribe their behavior within the confine of traditional, gender-typed dating script where women are expected to wait to be chosen by men. By depicting younger men as pursuing older women, the women in this study were also able to deflect the responsibility of their deviant behavior onto someone else (i.e. younger men) and to highlight how no one actually suffers from their behavior, which are common “techniques of neutralization” individuals engaged in deviant behavior can resort to in order to avoid negative interpretations of themselves (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Overall, as a stigma management strategy, the “younger men as pursuers” rhetoric allowed older women to

present themselves as the sexually empowered women they believe themselves to be, without risking too many negative consequences.

This study also sheds light on the difficulties women who date younger men face when trying to ignore the dominant societal discourse indicating that as they age, they become less physically attractive and therefore lose value as intimate partners. Indeed, many women — mostly women over 40 — reported being initially surprised to see that younger men could be interested in women like themselves, since they no longer had a youthful physical appearance. Many women preferred letting men approach them as it likely decreased the risk of rejection. Most women managed to temporarily neutralize the idea that younger women are more valuable than older women by presenting younger men as seeking sexually knowledgeable, highly desiring, confident, and assertive women and by thinking of these qualities as developing in women with age and life experience. Indeed, by describing themselves as sexually empowered women and by imagining young women as rather passive, timid and insecure lovers, these women were able to (temporarily) reposition themselves higher in the hierarchy of desirable partners. However, a large portion of women — mostly those in their 30s and 40s — were somewhat anxious when assessing the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships, in part, because they suspected that one day, their younger partner might no longer find them physically attractive.

Furthermore, when assessing whether their intimate relationships with younger men could last, most women also struggled with resisting the traditional conception of women's worth as ultimately determined by their reproductive capacities/childrearing aptitudes. Indeed, most participants in their 30s (and some in their early 40s) wondered whether they should stay with their younger partner, considering that younger men might not be ready to have children soon. These women worried that they might miss their reproductive window while waiting for their younger

partner to hear the call to fatherhood. Most older participants, on the other hand, were no longer interested in and/or physically capable of bearing children, and they were often hesitant to develop long-lasting relationships with younger men because they imagined younger men as wanting to eventually have children of their own. For those who were dating younger men who were already fathers, they feared that their partners would eventually expect them to help with childcare. Interestingly, the women in this study who had children at home did not talk about age-hypogamous intimate relationships as having the potential to alleviate their own childcare responsibilities. Overall, these findings show the non-conventional nature of age-hypogamous intimate relationships has very little effect on women's perceptions of their ability to renegotiate traditional gendered expectations regarding the division of labor within heterosexual relationships.

This study also highlighted how women of different ages have different perceptions of the dating market and of the desirability of single men their age and that these perceptions affect women's dating choices. Indeed, compared to women over 40, those in their 30s generally painted a much more positive portrait of the options they could find in their age range on the dating market. On the other hand, most women in their 40s and 50s seemed to be quite disappointed with the single men in their age bracket or older. Some aspects that discouraged these women from dating men their age or older include: men's lack of energy, men's health issues, men's monotonous lifestyle, men's disillusioned outlook on love and intimate relationships, men's displeasing physical appearance, and general sexual incompatibility. While there is no reason to doubt women's accounts of how they perceive the desirability of single men their age or older, one should also consider that pointing out how men their age were often not up to their standards might also be a way for older women to disrupt the common societal discourse indicating that aging has a stronger devaluation effect on women than on men.

This dissertation also highlights how women's dating goals differ depending on their age and how that affects the way they assess the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships. I found that women in their 50s seemed much less preoccupied than younger participants with whether or not their age-hypogamous intimate relationships would last. In fact, unlike women in their 50s, women in their 30s and 40s presented many potential obstacles to the longevity of their relationships with younger men. They mentioned their younger partners' (perceived) disinterest for settling down, and their (perceived) lack of maturity as potential obstacles to their relationships' longevity. They also worried that they would miss out on their chance to have biological children and they feared that their partner might no longer find them physically attractive when the signs of aging become more visible on their bodies.

I argued that because women in their 50s were no longer hoping to eventually settle down and have (biological) children, they were liberated from some of the anxiety associated with choosing younger men as long-term intimate partners. It is also worth noting that while the women in this study perceived important age-related obstacles to the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships, many of them chose to let their relationship develop despite the negative aspects that came with their nonconventional relationships. This study therefore brings additional evidence supporting the contention that age-hypogamous intimate relationship can be more than flings.

Overall, I have shown, in this dissertation, that younger and older women often differ with regards to their experiences of age-hypogamous intimate relationships in the dating context. I have explained these differences by the fact that younger and older participants differ with regards to: (a) the extent to which they were affected by the societal discourse indicating women become less valuable as they age; (b) the extent to which they thought they could be criticized for being too

sexually desiring; (c) whether they perceived younger men approaching them as fetishizing older women like themselves; (d) whether they approached dating with the hopes of eventually moving in with/marry their partners and/or have (more) children; and finally, (e) their perceptions of the desirability of men their age or older on the dating market.

Contributions

This dissertation contributes to the areas of sociology of gender, sociology of family, as well as sociology of sexuality. First, this study sheds some interesting insight with respect to women's negotiation of normative expectations regarding dating and sexual behavior in the heterosexual context. Specifically, it improves our understanding of the ways through which age differences between partners can facilitate/complicate women's desire/capacity to re-negotiate gender-typed scripts dictating behavior in the relationship formation process as well as during sexual interactions. It also allows us to understand how a woman's age influences her ability to disrupt dating and sexual scripts, and the types of arguments she resorts to when facing criticism regarding her dating and sexual behavior.

By investigating an understudied intimate relationship form such as age-hypogamous relationships, the findings presented here also contribute to the literature on partner selection. This dissertation sheds light on some of the reasons why some women choose younger men as intimate partners, and the considerations affecting women's desire/ability to develop long-lasting relationships with their younger partners. For instance, it provides more evidence that the importance women are assumed to place on a man's socioeconomic status when evaluating the desirability of a prospective partner has been overestimated. It also sheds light onto the ways in which women assess their own value as intimate partners and shows how difficult it can be for women to resist traditional conceptions of women's worth as long-term partners as ultimately

associated with their youthful physical appearance and their reproductive capacities/childrearing aptitudes. It also clarifies how women's assessment of their own value can differ depending on whether they are thinking of short-term dating or long-term, serious relationships. Indeed, when it comes to age-hypogamous intimate relationships, most women managed to think of themselves as highly valuable partners in the temporary context of sex, but they commonly struggled to maintain that sense of high desirability when imagining long-term relationships.

Based on the common assumption that women and men engage in a beauty/socioeconomic status exchange when seeking an intimate partner, one could easily assume that middle-aged women in age-hypogamous relationships choose younger men as their intimate partners as a last resort, because all the other men their age or older prefer younger women. Such assumptions, I argue, are tainted by sexist perceptions of men's and women's value as intimate partners, which assume that men gain in value as they age while women lose value. Furthermore, this type of reasoning depicts women as passive victims of men's choices, as somewhat forced to accept whoever is left, instead of presenting women as agentic players who — like men — make their choices based on their own preferences for partners' individual characteristics.

In fact, the results presented here show that most often, women — especially those in their 40s and 50s — choose younger men because they consider them to be more desirable as intimate partners than similar-age or older men. While many women in their 40s and 50s report that most of the men their age prefer younger women, most of them also report that they do not consider the single men in their age bracket to meet their standards anyway. Considering the type of characteristics they were looking for in a partner, many of these older participants opted for younger men because they perceived them to be a better fit for themselves than similar-age or older men. In other words, while it is important to recognize the structural and cultural forces influencing women's ability

and desire to partner with certain types of individuals, it is also important to acknowledge women's agency in the partner selection process.

Finally, by examining women's accounts of the intimate relationship formation process in the context of age-hypogamous dating, women's perceptions of the sexual dynamic between younger men and themselves, and women's perceptions of the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships, this dissertation elucidates the extent to which the common cultural representations of 'cougars' or age-hypogamous intimate relationships correspond to what real women who date younger men experience. It shows that on many aspects, real women who date younger men do not correspond to widespread assumptions about them and that a considerable portion of assumptions regarding 'cougars' are just myths.

Limitations of this study

First, it is important to recognize that this study was based on women's experiences of age-hypogamous intimate relationships, and to reiterate that none of women's younger partners participated in this study. While a lot of the results presented here touch on men's preferences, motivations and expectations, one must keep in mind that these findings solely reflect women's *perceptions* of younger men's experiences. It remains unclear to what extent women's perceptions of younger men's preferences, motivations, and expectations reflect what men dating older women *actually* experience.

Second, it is important to acknowledge that silence vis-à-vis a certain theme during an interview does not automatically mean that this topic is not important for participants. For instance, the results from this study indicated that women rarely mentioned a man's socioeconomic status as influencing their decision to initially form an intimate relationship with younger men or their

assessment of the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships. As mentioned earlier, it is possible that a man's financial resources or social status were not important considerations *at the moment*, considering that these women were still in the dating stage of their relationships. Considering that cohabitation and marriage generally involve a considerable amount of economic/material resource sharing between partners (Belleau, 2011), it is possible that a partner's socioeconomic status would become more salient if they were to move in together and/or get married.

It is also possible that when it comes to age-hypogamous intimate relationships, a man's financial situation or social status does matter but not as much as other considerations (i.e. desire to settle down, desire to have children, maturity, etc.), and that, during their interviews, participants chose to emphasize only what was *most* important to them. It is also possible that some women avoided pointing out younger men's financial resources because they think it is uncouth for women to *admit* placing a lot of value in a man's financial resources. Considering the widespread use of derogatory expressions such as 'gold-digger' to qualify women who are perceived to have married a man mostly to benefit from his wealth, it is possible that some women might have chosen not to emphasize that topic during their interview because they wanted to avoid looking like a woman whose choices of intimate partners are driven by monetary incentives.

Similarly, only a minority of participants mentioned stigma as something that could prevent their age-hypogamous intimate relationship from lasting. This is surprising considering that the vast majority of the women in this study perceived society to be disapproving of age-hypogamous intimate relationships, and that many — especially women in their 40s and 50s — appeared somewhat afraid of being read as deviant because of their non-conventional choices of partners. This was particularly visible when women talked about the way they met their younger partner.

But when women reflected on whether their age-hypogamous intimate relationship would last, few of them talked about stigma as influencing their desire to see their relationship develop further or not.

As previously mentioned, the women who talked about stigma as an obstacle to the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships were most often those whose partner were much younger than them. This suggests that the size of the age difference can influence women's perceptions of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships' longevity potential. However, many women who dated men who were much younger than them did *not* describe the longevity potential of their age-hypogamous intimate relationship as influenced by stigma. It is possible that most of these women did not want to think of themselves as victims of societal pressure and that they preferred imagining themselves as free agents who can make their own dating choices without caring about other people's approval. In this sense, it might be easier for women to cling to commonly used cultural narrative regarding the factors influencing the success of (heterosexual) intimate relationships — such as whether both partners want to settle down, whether both partners want to have children, whether both partners have achieved a similar level of maturity, etc. — than to admit that their dating choices are guided, in part, by what others think is acceptable.

Third, while this study sheds important insight on middle-aged women's experiences of age-hypogamous intimate relationships, it is also important to acknowledge that the sample used for this study only comprised of Canadian-born women, and that it comprised almost exclusively of white women. The lack of racial/ethnic diversity in this sample is an important limitation one should keep in mind when considering the applicability of these results to non-white women or women born in other countries. One should also note that the sampling strategy used for this study

does not completely erase all traces of cultural differences between my participants. For instance, when creating the sample, I did not control for women's religious background.

I also allowed both French-speaking and English-speaking Canadians to participate even though there is documented evidence of some cultural differences between the two groups (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004; Léger, Nantel, & Duhamel, 2016), such as with regards to the way that they think of marriage and cohabitation. In fact, choosing a common-law union as an alternative to marriage is more common in Quebec — where the majority of the population speaks French — than in the English-speaking provinces of Canada (Laplante, 2014; Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2017b; Vanier Institute of the Family, 2010). In 2016, 34.3 percent of the total population aged 15 and over was married in Quebec while 22.0 percent were living with a common-law partner. In comparison, in Canada, 45.7 percent were married and only 12.0 percent were living in a common-law union (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Within Quebec, the preference for common-law unions over marriage is however more pronounced among French-speaking Quebecers than among English-speaking Quebecers or other linguistic groups (Laplante, 2014; Turcotte & Belanger, 1997). While I did not detect differences in experiences based on my participants' language, one should consider that there could be differences if one were to conduct a similar study elsewhere in Canada.

Fourth, the sample used in this study only included women aged 30 to 60. It is unclear how women under 30 or over 60 compare to middle-aged women with regards to their experience of age-hypogamous intimate relationships, and one should abstain from applying the findings of this study to young adult women or elderly women. While it would be interesting to study the experiences of young adult women or elderly women, this was beyond the scope of this study. Indeed, one of the objectives of this research was to assess to what extent cultural representations of 'cougars'

correspond to what real women who date younger men experience, and ‘cougars’ are generally imagined as middle-aged women.

One should note that it is unclear how many single, elderly women date younger men. While we know that there is a higher proportion of single women than single men among the elderly population (Statistics Canada, 2017a), and that as they age, women become increasingly open to the idea of dating younger men (Levesque & Caron, 2004; Montenegro, 2003; Pixley et al., 2007; South, 1991), no studies so far have provided statistical data on the proportion of single Canadian women in their 60s or older who date younger men. It is therefore unclear if I would have been able to find enough single Montreal women in their 60s (or older) who date younger men to allow for a comparison with the three other age groups.

Lastly, the results presented in this dissertation emerged from the stories of women who have experienced the dating market in a big city. Considering the cultural taboo surrounding age-hypogamous intimate relationships, it is likely that trying to date younger men is a different reality when one resides in a small town where most people know one another. Furthermore, since they are more populated, large cities offer much more options to single women looking for intimate partners, which increases the odds of finding younger male partners.

Future research

In order to fully understand the gender dynamic within age-hypogamous intimate relationships, it is important to investigate men’s experiences, instead of relying on women’s perceptions of men’s preferences, motivations and expectations. There are many unanswered questions. For instance, many women in this study — mostly those over 40 — depicted the relationship formation process in the context of age-hypogamous dating as one that mirrored the traditional, culture-level dating

script. It would be necessary to explore younger men's perception of the relationship formation process, and their strategies to find older prospective partners and convince them to accept their propositions.

Furthermore, women's depictions of the sexual interplay between their younger partners and themselves raise many questions that can only be answered by talking directly to men in age-hypogamous intimate relationships. How do younger men feel with regards to older women's perceptions of younger men as having impressive erectile capacities and a strong sex drive? Do they feel pressured by these high expectations? Do men dating older women feel objectified by those women? How does sleeping with older women influence a man's reputation among his male peers? Do men gain social status by sleeping with older women, or do they face criticism for engaging in this non-normative relationship form?

The women in this study made many assumptions about what younger men wanted in a long-term partner and what younger men would eventually see as an obstacle to the continuation of their age-hypogamous intimate relationships. For instance, many women worried that their younger partner might one day no longer find them physically attractive, and many worried that their younger partners could leave them to be with a younger woman who can still offer them biological children. In order to get a full, balanced portrait of the dynamics at play, it would be important to discuss with younger men in order to know how they see the future of their relationship, and what they actually perceive as potential obstacles to their age-hypogamous intimate relationships' longevity.

Considering that there is very little qualitative research on individuals' experiences of age-hypogamous cohabitational/marital unions, scholars should explore this avenue further. How do women's perceptions of benefits and advantages of dating younger partners differ from those

identified by women who are married to their younger partners? Does age hypogamy affect the way spouses share household chores and childcare responsibilities, and if so how? What happens to the dynamic within age-hypogamous intimate relationships once the wife reaches older ages, and becomes more physically dependent on her partner for caregiving and housework?

There is also little to no information, to my knowledge, on how age hypogamy affects the children of individuals in such unconventional relationships. Are children affected by the cultural representations of age-hypogamous intimate relationships, and if so, how are they affected? Do they experience teasing or negative reactions from peers because of their untraditional family form? What are the benefits and disadvantages that children see in their (step)mother being older than their (step)father? As for age-hypogamous couples who choose the route of adoption or in-vitro fertilization (IVF) in order to have a child together, how do their experiences compare to those of similar-age or age-hypergamous couples? Do they face particular obstacles because their couple is age-hypogamous?

More broadly, it is important that more scholars investigate the dating and sexual experiences of women at midlife. Indeed, while there is a plethora of literature on dating and sexual scripts among teenagers and young adults, there is much less data on individuals' experiences in later stages of life. Considering the high rate of divorce and the fact that many middle-aged (and elderly) men and women then go back on the dating market in search of an intimate partner, it is important to explore their dating experiences as well.

APPENDIX A- RECRUITMENT FLYER

Avez-vous un partenaire amoureux ou sexuel plus jeune que vous?

Vous êtes invitée à participer à une étude sur les relations amoureuses et la sexualité des femmes au mitan de leur vie, plus précisément sur les expériences des femmes avec des hommes plus jeunes qu'elles.

Les femmes qui correspondent aux critères suivants sont invitées à me contacter:

- Nées au Canada
- Parlant français ou anglais couramment
- Âgées entre 30 et 60 ans inclusivement
- Ayant (ou ayant récemment eu) un partenaire (masculin) amoureux ou sexuel plus jeune
- N'étant pas mariées à leur partenaire plus jeune
- N'habitant pas de façon permanente avec leur partenaire plus jeune

La participation à cette étude consiste en une entrevue individuelle d'environ 90 minutes. La participation à cette étude se fait sur une base volontaire. Aucune compensation monétaire ne sera offerte. Toute information recueillie durant l'entrevue demeurera strictement confidentielle.

Si vous désirez participer à cette étude ou si vous avez des questions concernant cette étude, veuillez contacter Milaine Alarie directement (voir coordonnées ci-bas).

Are you dating or sleeping with a younger man?

This is an invitation to participate in a study on dating and sexuality at midlife, more precisely on women's experiences with intimate relationships with younger men.

Women who correspond to these criteria are invited to contact me:

- Canadian-born
- Who speak French or English fluently
- Who are between 30 and 60 years old
- Who have (or have recently had) a younger male partner
- Who are not married to nor living with their younger partner

Participation in this study will consist of a one-on-one interview of approximately 90 minutes in length. Participation in this study is voluntary. No compensation will be offered. All information obtained in the interview will remain strictly confidential.

If you would like to participate in this research study or if you have questions, you may contact Milaine Alarie.

Milaine Alarie,
PhD Candidate, Sociology
McGill University
milaine.alarie@mail.mcgill.ca



*This project is supervised by/Ce projet est effectué sous la supervision de:
Professor Elaine Weiner, McGill University (Tel: 514-398-6843; Email: elaine.weiner@mcgill.ca)

APPENDIX B — SAMPLE SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Parental Status	Number of children	Children living at home (yes or no)	Income	Education
Annabelle	32	Never married (but previously in a common-law union)	No children	N/A	N/A	\$30,000-\$44,999	Undergraduate degree
Ashley	32	Never married (but previously in a common-law union)	No children	N/A	N/A	\$0- \$14,999	Graduate degree
Becky	32	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	\$15,000-\$29,999	Graduate degree

Cailin	38	Divorced	Mother	2	Yes	\$30,000- \$44,999	CEGEP or professional college diploma
Daphney	39	Never married/Never common law	Mother	2	Yes	\$45,000- \$59,999	Graduate degree
Estelle	37	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	\$45,000- \$59,999	Undergraduate degree
Fiona	37	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	1	Yes	\$15,000- \$29,999	Less than a high school diploma
Ginette	34	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	No children	N/A	N/A	\$45,000- \$59,999	CEGEP or professional college diploma

Jackie	30	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	\$30,000-\$44,999	Graduate degree
Katarina	31	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	\$30,000-\$44,999	CEGEP or professional college diploma
Kathy	35	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	\$45,000-\$59,999	Some university (but no diploma)
Louise	32	Never married (but previously in a common-law union)	No children	N/A	N/A	\$0- \$14,999	Undergraduate degree
Martine	33	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	\$45,000-\$59,999	Undergraduate degree

Natalie	35	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	Don't know/prefer not to say	Graduate degree
Pamela	39	Divorced	Mother	3	Yes	\$105,000 or more	Graduate degree
Raphaelle	37	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	\$105,000 or more	Graduate degree
Solange	35	Never married (but previously in a common-law union)	No children	N/A	N/A	\$45,000-\$59,999	Graduate degree
Uma	36	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	\$15,000-\$29,999	Graduate degree

Valerie	34	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	No children	N/A	N/A	\$45,000- \$59,999	Undergraduate degree
Vanessa	39	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	3	Yes	\$60,000- \$74,999	Undergraduate degree
Yasmina	33	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	\$15,000- \$29,999	Graduate degree
Zoey	35	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	\$45,000- \$59,999	Undergraduate degree
Brigitte	43	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	2	Yes	\$60,000- \$74,999	Diploma of Vocational Studies (DVS)

Camille	41	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	1	No	\$60,000- \$74,999	Some university (but no diploma)
Caroline	43	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	3	Yes	\$30,000- \$44,999	High school diploma
Dahlia	44	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	2	Yes	\$105,000 or more	Graduate degree
Erika	45	Married, but separated	Mother	2	Yes	\$30,000- \$44,999	Some university (but no diploma)
Felicity	40	Never married/Never common law	No children	N/A	N/A	\$45,000- \$59,999	Undergraduate degree

Gayle	40	Divorced	Mother	2	Yes	\$30,000- \$44,999	CEGEP or professional college diploma
Henrietta	45	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	3	Yes	\$45,000- \$59,999	Undergraduate degree
Holly	44	Divorced	Mother	1	Yes	\$75,000- \$89,999	Graduate degree
Isabelle	46	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	1	Yes	\$75,000- \$89,999	Undergraduate degree
Jasmine	49	Married, but separated	Mother	1	Yes	\$45,000- \$59,999	CEGEP or professional college diploma

Joanna	48	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	No children	N/A	N/A	\$60,000- \$74,999	Some university (but no diploma)
Laurie	46	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	No children	N/A	N/A	\$105,000 or more	Graduate degree
Odette	42	Divorced	Mother	2	Yes	\$15,000- \$29,999	Undergraduate degree
Olivia	42	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	No children	N/A	N/A	\$30,000- \$44,999	Some university (but no diploma)
Patricia	49	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	2	Yes	\$60,000- \$74,999	Undergraduate degree

Rachel	49	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	2	No	Don't know/prefer not to say	Diploma of Vocational Studies (DVS)
Tatianna	49	Divorced	No children	N/A	N/A	\$90,000- \$104,999	Undergraduate degree
Wendy	43	Married, but separated	No children	N/A	N/A	\$90,000- \$104,999	Undergraduate degree
Whitney	43	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	No children	N/A	N/A	\$60,000- \$74,999	Undergraduate degree
Yvonne	43	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	2	Yes	\$30,000- \$44,999	Graduate degree

Zara	46	Married, but separated	Mother	2	Yes	\$15,000-\$29,999	Undergraduate degree
Ariel	51	Divorced	No children	N/A	N/A	\$60,000-\$74,999	Graduate degree
Béatrice	56	Divorced	Mother	2	No	\$45,000-\$59,999	CEGEP or professional college diploma
Edith	60	Married, but separated	Mother	1	Yes	\$105,000 or more	Undergraduate degree
Helene	53	Divorced	Mother	4	No	Don't know/prefer not to say	Diploma of Vocational Studies (DVS)

Iris	52	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	No children	N/A	N/A	\$45,000- \$59,999	Some CEGEP or professional college (but not diploma)
Ivana	50	Divorced	Mother	2	Yes	\$30,000- \$44,999	Some university (but no diploma)
Kassandra	54	Divorced	Mother	1	No	\$45,000- \$59,999	Some university (but no diploma)
Lana	53	Divorced	No children	N/A	N/A	\$45,000- \$59,999	High school diploma
Monica	51	Never married (but previously in a common- law union)	Mother	1	Yes	\$45,000- \$59,999	Undergraduate degree

Naomie	57	Divorced	Mother	3	No	\$90,000- \$104,999	Graduate degree
Pauline	53	Divorced	Mother	2	Yes	\$60,000- \$74,999	Graduate degree
Stephanie	50	Divorced	Mother	3	No	\$30,000- \$44,999	Diploma of Vocational Studies (DVS)
Tania	52	Divorced	No children	N/A	N/A	Don't know/prefer not to say	Some university (but no diploma)
Xana	54	Divorced	Mother	2	No	\$90,000- \$104,999	Graduate degree

Xylia	59	Divorced	Mother	2	No	\$45,000- \$59,999	Undergraduate degree
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APPENDIX C — CONSENT FORM



Department of Sociology
McGill University
Stephen Leacock Building
855 Sherbrooke Street West,
Montreal, Qc, H3A 2T7

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Title of Research: *Understanding middle-aged women's experiences with age-hypogamous intimate relationships*
Researcher: Milaine Alarie, Sociology PhD Student, McGill University
Contact Information: McGill University, Department of Sociology, 855 Sherbrooke Street West, 712 Leacock Building, Montreal QC H3A 2T7
Tel: (438) 874-2484 **E-mail:** milaine.alarie@mail.mcgill.ca
Faculty Supervisor: Professor Elaine Weiner
Contact Information: McGill University, Department of Sociology, 855 Sherbrooke Street West, 712 Leacock Building, Montreal QC H3A 2T7
Tel: (514) 398-6843 **E-mail:** elaine.weiner@mcgill.ca

Purpose of the Research:

This study is intended to explore women's experiences of dating and/or sleeping with younger men in the heterosexual dating context. More broadly, this study seeks to improve our understanding of women's intimate relationships and sexuality at midlife.

What is Involved in Participation:

Your participation involves a single interview of approximately ninety minutes in duration. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any particular question or end the interview at any time.

With your permission, the interview will be recorded using a password-protected audio device. The audio file and the socio-demographic questionnaire will be transcribed in an electronic document (i.e., Microsoft Word) and they will both be destroyed once transcribed. All documents will be stored in a password-protected personal computer only accessible by my faculty supervisor, a person hired to transcribe the interviews, and myself.

The information you provide will be disclosed in a way that eliminates any chances of associating it with you. All interview material will be kept **confidential** through coding and storing.

In addition to being used for this study, I may also use the information you provide during the interview in future related studies, always in accordance with the confidentiality agreement mentioned here.

You can choose to withdraw from this study at any time by contacting me (see Contact Information).

Finally, you will receive a copy of this consent form to keep for your own reference.



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Consent:

I agree to be interviewed: YES NO

I agree to be recorded: YES NO

I consent to your use of this interview material in future related studies you may do: YES NO

Participant's Signature: _____

Participant's Name (printed): _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

If you have any questions concerning the ethicality of this project, please contact Lynda McNeil:
Research Ethics Officer, McGill University, James Administration Building, 845 Sherbrooke St. West, room 429,
Montreal, Qc, H3A 2T5,
Tel: 514-398-6831, Fax: 514-398-4644, Email :lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca

APPENDIX D — SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Socio-demographic questionnaire

1) How old are you? _____

2) What is your race?

White ___ Black ___ Asian ___ Latina ___

First Nations ___ Middle-Eastern ___ Mixed ___ Don't know/prefer not to say ___

3) What is the highest level of schooling you have ever reached?

Less than a high school diploma ___

High school diploma ___

DEP (Diplôme d'études professionnelles) ___

Some CEGEP or professional college (but not diploma) ___

CEGEP diploma or professional college diploma ___

Some university (but no diploma) ___

Undergraduate degree ___

Graduate degree ___

Don't know/prefer not to say ___

4) What is your personal income (before tax)?

\$0- \$14,999 ____

\$15,000- \$29,999 ____

\$30,000- \$44,999 ____

\$45,000- \$59,999 ____

\$60,000- \$74,999 ____

\$75,000 - \$89,999 ____

\$90,000- \$104,999 ____

\$105,000 and more ____

Don't know/prefer not to say ____

5) What is your current marital status?

Married, but separated and not living with my husband ____

Common-law, but separated and not living with my common-law partner ____

Divorced ____

Widow ____

Never married, but I have been in a common-law union before ____

Never married, and I have never been in a common-law union ____

6) How long have you been legally single (without a husband or a common-law spouse)?

Always been ____ OR ____ years ____ months

7) Do you have any children?

Yes ____

No ____ (please, go to question 12)

8) How many children do you have? _____

9) How old are your children? _____

10) How many of your children currently live with you (if zero, go to question 12)? _____

11) Do these children live with you full time or do you share custody? _____

12) Do you live with any other people (besides your children, if you have any)?

Yes ____ (please indicate their relation to you, e.g. mother; friend)

No ____

13) In what city do you currently live? _____

14) How many years/months you been living in this city? _____ years _____ months

APPENDIX E — INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

Motivation for doing the interview:

- Could you tell me what motivated you to participate in this study?

Perceptions of what “younger man” means

- This study focused on women’s experiences with younger men. In your mind, how young does a man have to be for you to think you are dating a “younger man”?

Current love/sexual life

- Could you tell me more about where you are right now with regards to your current love life and sexual life?

Love/sexual history

- In order for me to have a general idea of how you are, could you provide me with a quick overview of the important intimate relationships you’ve had in your life?

Dating at midlife

- How would you describe your experience being on the dating market at midlife?

Dating preferences

- Thinking about the last years of your life as a single woman, what do you usually look for...
 - in terms of relationships?
 - In terms of personal characteristics in men?
 - How does age matter for you, if at all?
- Have your preferences changed over time, and if so, how?

Experience with age-hypogamous intimate relationships- Overview

- Is (*NAME- current younger partner*) the first younger partner you've ever had?
 - Who was the first younger partner you've ever had?
 - If not, how many younger male partners have you had in your life?
 - In your lifetime, would you say you've chosen mostly younger, same-age or older men?

Experiences with your FIRST younger partner (* if different from current younger partner)

- How did you meet (*NAME- first younger partner*)?
 - (** if needed*) Tell me more about the first interactions...
- How did you feel about the age difference at first?
 - Has your feeling changed over time? How so?
- At that time, were you looking specifically for a younger man?
- What kind of relationship were you looking for when you met him?
- Did the relationship evolved over time? How so?

Experiences with CURRENT younger man

- How did you meet (*NAME- current younger partner*)?
 - (** if needed*) Tell me more about the first interactions...
- How did you feel about the age difference at first?
 - Has your feeling changed over time? How so?
- At that time, were you looking specifically for a younger man?
- What kind of relationship were you looking for when you met him?
- Did the relationship evolved over time? How so?

Age preference

- When you think of the kind of partners you could be interested in, do you have a limit with regards to how young/how old a new partner could be?
 - Can you explain why you wouldn't consider a man younger than (MINIMUM AGE) and older than (MAXIMUM AGE)?
 - How strict are you about those limits? Are there contexts in which you don't mind going younger or older, and if so, what contexts?

Perceived benefits, disadvantages and risks associated with age hypogamy

- Do you see any advantages to dating younger men? If so, what are they?
- Do you see any disadvantages to dating younger men? If so, what are they?

Expectations with regards to the future

- What do you expect out of your relationships with (NAME- *current younger partner*)?
- How does the age difference influence the way you see the future with him?
- If you were to imagine a long-term relationship with (NAME- *current younger partner*), would there be any risks or benefits that you associate to his age?

Younger men's interest in older women

- What do you think young men are looking for in older women like you?

Age identity

- In general, do you mention your age when you meet a new partner?
 - When? Why/Why not?
 - Do you ask how old he is? When? Why/Why not?
- With regards to disclosing your age, do you act differently with men your age/older men compared to younger men? Why (or why not)?
- When on a date with younger men, do you feel like you have to adapt your look or your approach in order to look more youthful? How so?

Power dynamics

- Do you feel like the age difference influence the power dynamics between you and your younger partner(s)? And if so, how?
 - How does it differ, if at all, from your experience with men your age/older?

Children

- Do you feel like having children/not having children influences your interactions or relationships with younger men? And if so, how?
 - How does it differ, if at all, from your experience with men your age/older?

Money

- Do you feel like money influences your interactions or relationships with younger men? And if so, how?
 - How does it differ, if at all, from your experience with men your age/older?
 - Do you see any differences with regards to who pays for the bill?
 - Do you think your financial resources could be something that attracts younger men? Why/why not?

Sexuality

- Do you see any differences with regards to sex when you compare you experiences with younger men with those with men your age/older?
 - How does dating younger (vs. older) men influence the way you feel in bed?

Body image

- How does dating younger (vs. older) men influences the way you feel about your body?

People's reactions and stigma management

- Have you introduced (current younger partner) to your friends and family?
 - Why? Why not?
 - What have been their reactions?
- Have you ever encountered reactions (positive or negative) from people outside of your friends and family? Tell me about it.
- Do you have strategies to avoid negative comments or reactions?
- If someone had an issue with you dating younger men, what would you say?

Feelings towards aging

- How do you feel about aging?

Feelings towards cultural representations of older women

- How do you feel about the way older women/older men are presented in the media?
 - How does that make you feel?

Feelings towards age hypergamy

- How do you feel about men who date younger women?

“Cougar” and identity choices

- **I see you already know the term ‘cougar’ / Do you know the term ‘cougar’?**
 - What does that term mean to you?
 - Do you see yourself as a “cougar”? Why? Why not?
 - Has anyone ever referred to you as a “cougar”? How did you react?

Advice for other women

- If a friend of yours came to you, told you she was curious about dating younger men, and asked you for advice, what would you tell her?

Last words

- Is there anything you would want the public to know about women's intimate relationships with younger men?
- Is there anything else you would like to add before we finish up this interview?

APPENDIX F — LIST OF RESOURCES



Department of Sociology
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Services de nature psycho-sociale à Montréal Psycho-social resources in Montreal

Agression sexuelle/ Sexual abuse

Centre pour les victimes d'agression sexuelle de Montréal/ Montreal Sexual Assault Center

Tél : 514-934-4504 (ligne d'urgence 24/7 /emergency line 24/7)

Tél : 514-934-0354 # 7456

Courriel/Email : cvasm@videotron.ca

Site web/Website: <http://www.cvasm.org/main.asp?lang=fr&page=accueil>

Violence conjugale/ Domestic violence

Femmes averties/ Women Aware

Tél: 1-866-489-1110 or 514-489-1110

Courriel/ Email: N/A

Site web/ Website: <http://www.womenaware.ca/>

Assistance aux femmes

Tél: 514-270-8291

Courriel/ Email: information@assistanceauxfemmes.ca

Site web/ Website: <http://www.assistanceauxfemmes.ca/>

Prévention du suicide/ Suicide prevention

Association québécoise de prévention du suicide

Tél: 1-866-277-3553

Site web/Website: <http://www.aqps.info/besoin-aide-urgente/>

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