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ASHTON
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MARRIED FOR FOUR YEARS, DEMI AND ASHTON HAVE DEFIED SCEPTICS WHO SAID THEY WOULDN'T LAST.

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YOUNGER MEN: MARRIAGE MATERIAL

Women over 30 are defying the relationship boundaries, not just dating but *marrying* men as much as 13 years younger. **ZARELDA MARIE GOH** finds out if it's just a "cougar" thing, or if this means the dating pool of eligible men just got bigger.

“The parties in these couplings usually fit a certain personality type – women who like to lead and men who are more easy-going.”

Nevermind your age – it’s easy to see the appeal of younger men. Think 20something actors like Robert Pattinson or Zac Efron. They’re cute, sexy and probably look better with their shirts off than guys a decade older.

But if you are in your 30s or 40s, would you date a man as young as them? It seems a growing number of women here are willing to, nevermind the jibes/taunts of “Cougar!” or “Cradle snatcher!”

Older-woman-younger-man couples have been around before, but while there aren’t any actual figures, relationship experts we spoke to say they’re increasingly visible. And there’s a new twist to the phenomenon: the age gap is much wider. Ten years ago, a five-year difference was considered outrageous. Now, there are couples where the woman is 12 years older, and the reaction, after an initial double take, would be slight dismay.

“People are surprised when I say my husband is much younger, but they move on very quickly,” reveals 32-year-old *My Paper* columnist Ana Ismail-Ow, whose husband Leonard, is 10 years younger. “It’s because I’m honest about it. My outlook influences how others view me.”

Dr Adrian Wang, a consultant psychiatrist at Gleneagles Medical Centre, thinks the reason for acceptance of such couples is the blurring distinction on what constitutes young and old. “A woman in her late 30s or early 40s may have been considered ‘old’ a decade ago, but nowadays women are having children, looking good and feeling fit well into their 40s. Medical science, good nutrition, and a plethora of beauty products have delayed the effects of ageing,” he says.

WHY WOMEN MADE LOVE WAIT

The women likely to be dating younger men today probably focused on their careers over finding a mate. As Chong Cheh Hoon, a counsellor and senior vice-president of non-profit organisation Focus On The Family, explains: “While

building their careers, some women may have missed connecting with male friends in their age group. So when the time comes for them to want to settle down, they have to expand their options for potential partners, and that could possibly include younger men.”

Dr Norman Li, a Singapore Management University professor who specialises in mating and attraction, agrees: “Though research shows that women tend to want men who make more money and have higher status than themselves, most highly successful men their age or older would already be married or single but pursuing women in their 20s.”

This was the case for Sharon*, 34. “I concentrated mostly on my career. Although I did find time to socialise, my friends were either attached or married. I was afraid all the eligible guys would be taken and there would be no one left for me.” She admits to having been slightly apprehensive when she found herself falling for Mike*, nine years her junior. Both are in the financial industry and were introduced by a mutual friend. After one and a half years of dating, the two plan to marry next year.

The rising number of divorced women in their 30s is another factor, say relationship experts. Five years ago, the average age of women divorcing was 36. By 2007, it had dropped to 34. “Women have a need to find someone to spend their life with – to have kids, share special moments with – before they’re too old to do so. For a divorced woman in her 30s, a younger man fits the bill as many men around her age or older would already be married. It’s only natural to hook up with a younger man, especially if you’re a woman over 30 who looks young,” says Dr Wang.

THE APPEAL OF THE YOUNGER MAN

Though less financially stable and mature, the women we spoke to say younger guys have their advantages.

Veronica Yap, 36, recalls how much she liked being courted the “old-fashioned” way when she began dating businessman Bill Chew, 27. “Older men woo women by spending lots of money. Bill was different. When we first started dating four years ago, he did sweet things like make cards and buy cute keychains for me. I felt like a teenager again,” says the businesswoman.

Relationship trainer Yanni Hwang, 38, was drawn to her 25-year-old fiance Chong Chwen Jiun, a financial consultant, because “he seemed more genuine. Older men tend to be more guarded. CJ didn’t play any games”.

As older men are more likely to possess paunches and receding hairlines, Sharon says: “Mike is buff and that turns me on. Even with age on their side, younger men probably make more effort to keep themselves fit.”

This makes bedroom action more exciting. The women say their partners are more eager to please them and try new things. This can be good and bad. Yanni says: “CJ is more passionate and energetic. It’s a bit overwhelming sometimes. But I’m not complaining.”

THE RULES OF ATTRACTION

Relationship experts say the parties in these couplings usually fit a certain personality type – “women who like to lead and men who are more easy-going”, as Dr Li describes. Veronica admits to being the “more dominant partner” while Bill says he is “more reserved”. Yanni says she “wears the pants” in her →

relationship, and CJ is fine with it.

Dr Wang says such younger men are attracted to women who take charge, especially if their mothers were like that. "It's not wrong to say that men seek comfort in familiarity in women who remind them of their mothers. This may be found in an older woman with nurturing and caring qualities."

But this can also backfire. Sharon says: "I've had more life experiences and when I try to give Mike advice, he sees it as me 'telling him off.'" Likewise for Yanni, who says: "I did everything on my own before I met CJ. When he tried to make changes, we got into fights. We've since learnt to compromise."

The women take a step back when necessary. Says Veronica: "By letting him make decisions, I'm allowing him to have more ownership in the relationship."

Even with the age disparity, these connections are solid. "These women see age as a state of mind. Having an emotional connection with someone is more important to them," says Dr Wang. CJ agrees. "What I realised is that women, regardless of their age, look for men who will listen to them, engage them in conversation and look beyond their physical attractiveness."

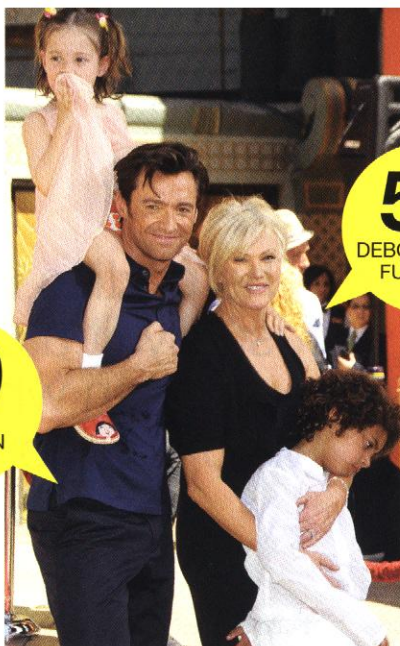
Of course, it helps that these women look at least five years younger than their age. Veronica says: "I think people automatically assume that as the older woman, I'm the one preying on younger men. If I were criticised by anyone, I'd say straight out that they got it wrong. A younger man pursued me because I have attractive qualities."

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE

Some couples admit having had to deal with some sort of criticism or teasing from family and friends. Veronica says she had to make an effort to make Bill's parents look past her age. "They thought I wasn't serious about their son, and were worried I would hurt him." Over time, they saw how Bill became a better person because of the relationship. "He became more mature and began to spend more time with his family."

An element that will inevitably affect these couples is age itself. Firstly,

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HUGH
JACKMAN



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DEBORRA-LEE
FURNESS

HUNKY HUGH COULD PROBABLY HAVE ANY WOMAN IN THE WORLD BUT HE'S REMAINED VERY MUCH A DEVOTED FAMILY MAN TO HIS WIFE AND KIDS.

the women *will* look older than their partners, if they don't already. Will they resort to plastic surgery to keep up with their husband's youthful looks? No, say the ones we spoke to. Ana says: "Aesthetic treatments like Botox or having invasive surgery go against my idea of ageing gracefully. But I wouldn't deprive myself of anti-ageing creams."

Other problems arise as the women reach their 40s and 50s and the men move into the prime of their careers. With the women's biological clocks ticking, the men may need to be prepared to make lifestyle changes once babies are in the picture.

The age factor did affect the plans of Soh Wah, 42, and Tom, 35, to have more children. The couple have a six-year-old daughter, Claire. Tom says: "I wish I had met Soh Wah earlier... Now it's risky to have more kids."

For men, the problem with having an older wife is that they may end up

ageing emotionally much earlier. Could being tied down early make them feel like they're missing out on their youth, and cause them to be unfaithful? "Men can stray regardless of whether their wives are older or younger," says Dr Li.

At the end of the day, what applies to all marriages applies to these relationships as well. "What will sustain a marriage are mutual respect, trust and affirming love," says Cheh Hoon.

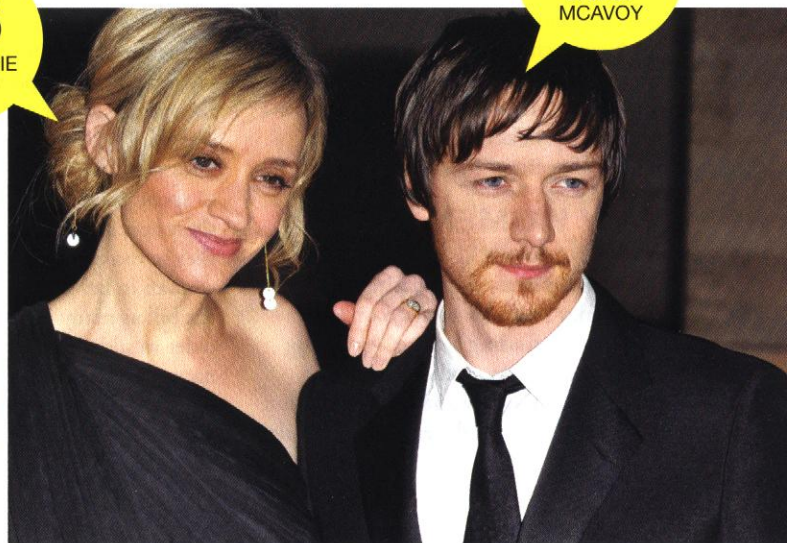
Veronica is confident that the strong foundation of her relationship with Bill will see them through the test of time. "The connection we have makes me forget that we're nine years apart," she says. For Soh Wah, finding Tom was a godsend, age notwithstanding. "In life you want to find someone you can really love and who has similar passions. Once you value these aspects of a relationship, then age becomes a non-issue." *HW*

* Names have been changed

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ANNE-MARIE
DUFF

JAMES MET ANNE-MARIE WHEN THEY STARRED TOGETHER IN A BRITISH TELEVISION SERIES. THEY'VE BEEN MARRIED FOR OVER TWO YEARS.



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JAMES
MCAVOY