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Older Women, Younger Men: Romantic Autonomy and Gender Constraint in the Film's Narratives

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Abstract

This study examines gender inequalities and societal biases in age-gap relationships, specifically focusing on the film's narratives entitled *The Idea of You* directed by Michael Showalter released in 2024. This film portrays an older woman who has a romantic relationship with a younger man. The age gap is sixteen years old difference. This research employs a qualitative approach and works within the theoretical framework of gender and feminist studies focusing on the character interactions, dialogues, and societal reactions toward age-gap relationships. The result shows that the age gap difference does matter when the women in relationships are older than men. They face much more social criticism compared to older men dating younger women, exposing the persistent societal biases that limit women's romantic autonomy. This research demonstrates how societal expectations continue to impose restrictive norms on women's autonomy, enforcing judgment and control over their relationship choices. By critically examining the narrative of the film, the study highlights the complexities of gender inequality within romantic relationships. This research contributes in giving better understandings for the viewers how media representations on romantic relationships are influenced by social norms, social expectations, and ideologies. This study is important for media literacy in supporting gender equality.

Keywords: age gap relationships, romantic autonomy, gender constraint, social expectation.

1. Introduction

Relationships with significant age differences have long intrigued society with the focus predominantly on older men with younger women. This neglects the equally compelling older women with younger men. Age differences in relationships often reflect broader societal structures, where men are typically older than women in couples, and it captures the gendered power dynamics (Bergström, 2018). Moreover, scholarly attention remains largely skewed, creating a notable gap in understanding romantic relationships with obvious age gap differences (Masenya, 2017). Unfair assumptions and skepticism are common responses to age-gap relationships with older women. Society tends to romanticize the "older men" while judging older women for engaging in similar relationships which leads to what is called a double standard. In this matter, the double standard refers to the perception of one society in addressing a romantic relationship with an obvious age gap difference. It seems to be normal and accepted if the men in older than the women but it is unaccepted when women are older than men. Then it creates social expectations and gender norms within a culture (Milhausen, Harold; Lehmiller, Agnew, 2011). These double standards stem from ingrained patriarchal values that prioritize male agency in romantic decisions

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while diminishing women's rights to pursue love freely, regardless of age. These biases are reflected not only in academic studies but also in media representations, where older women are frequently caricatured as "cougars" or "desperate," reducing their relationships to mere opportunism or vanity. People generally feel more accepting if the older person in a relationship is a man (Lehmiller, Agnew, 2011).

Society's view or stigma towards such relationships labels them as something unacceptable and socially challenging (Sela et al., 2018). The role of societal expectations and the like has contributed to forming or even limiting deeper relationships (Chopik, Edelstein, 2014). This perception is what the film *The Idea of You* (2024) brings to the screen. The film is about a 40-year-old single mother named Solène Marchand. Her life changes drastically when she goes to a music festival with her daughter. There, she meets Hayes Campbell, the lead singer of the famous boy band August Moon, who is 24 years old. A moment where what was initially just a temporary relationship turns into a romantic relationship that challenges social norms and age-related stereotypes in the stigma of society.

The film explores the complexities of their relationship, focusing on Solène's internal conflict as she balances her desires with the judgmental gazes of those around her. Hayes, on the other hand, must navigate the intense scrutiny of fame and his insecurities about their age difference. The film doesn't shy away from portraying how external pressures, including media sensationalism, fan backlash, and family dynamics influence such relationships. It also explores the impact of fame on personal lives and the struggle to protect intimate moments in public.

Relationships between people with significant age differences have long been a topic of social and academic interest. However, research tends to focus more on relationships between older men and younger women, while older women's relationships with younger men are less studied (Tembo, Mambwe, 2021: 353). As a result, many aspects of the development and sustainability of these relationships are not fully understood, especially the gender injustices experienced by women in such relationships. Thus, this research explores how *The Idea of You's* film portrays the struggles of age-gap relationships while challenging the double standards inherent in modern perceptions of love. It aims to show the biases and inequalities captured by traditional norms through the lens of gender and feminism.

This research is important for media literacy particularly to help individuals to critically analyze and understand how media shapes perceptions of social norms. Moreover, it empowers viewers to challenge the conventional understanding of gender and age gap differences in romantic relationships. This research highlights how the representation of romantic relationships with age gap differences can either reinforce or disrupt stereotypes. This helps empower individuals to recognize the biases and at the same time have a better understanding of how media representations are influenced by societal structures such as social norms, social expectations, and ideologies.

Further, this research has formulated research questions: How does age gap difference on romantic relationships present in the film? How does the film reveal the gap between the age gap difference romantic relationships and women's romantic autonomy? And how does the film challenge the social expectation of age gap romantic relationships?

2. Materials and methods

The method used in this research is qualitative. The qualitative method can be interpreted as a study of things that occur naturally (Busetto et al., 2020). The corpus used in this research is a film entitled *The Idea of You* launched in 2024 with data collection in the form of direct observation of the film and focusing on the narratives of the film. The technique used to analyze the narrative is close textual analysis which the researcher focuses on the text that brings the issues of age gap difference. Further, this applies to gender and feminism theories focusing on gender inequality for investigating age gap differences in the film.

The philosophy of feminism, men and women should have equal rights in terms of politics, decision-making, employment, and parenthood. It is made up of several social, cultural, and political movements that aim to provide men and women equal rights (Asnani, 2020 as cited in Mohajan, 2022). Depending on their personal views, background, and culture, feminists have as many different definitions of feminism as there are feminists; yet, gender equality is a universal concept (Haradhan, 2022). Feminism is a socio-political movement with the goal that women should be treated equally (Delaney, 2005 as cited in Haradhan, 2022). Gender inequality is defined as hierarchy between men and women's position, strength, and financial assets (Ridgeway, 2011).

These concepts are relevant to reveal society's views and stereotypes about age gap differences in romantic relationships and how they relate to gender issues.

3. Discussion

The idea that love overcomes societal norms and expectations is explored in depth in *The Idea of You's* film, which examines the intricacies of age-gap relationships, particularly from the standpoint of gender roles and social judgment. Hayes, a 24-year-old rising music star, and Solène, a 40-year-old woman, explore the complexities of their unconventional relationship in this movie. Social expectations, individual fears, and the emotional toll of outside criticism all play a part in their story as it develops.

Examinations about age differences in relationships are common, but women are usually criticized more than men in the same situation (McKenzie, 2021). In this film, we can see how unfair rules still exist in society. If an older man dates a younger woman, he is often praised. But if an older woman dates a younger man, she is often marginalized. This shows how strong patriarchal rules are that make people have certain views about relationships and love.

The film explores themes of gender inequity, societal pressure, and the emotional difficulties that arise in age-gap relationships. Through the experiences of the main characters and deep conversations, we are invited to think about our own prejudices. This film also invites us to see how existing social rules can affect people's relationships, especially for women attempting to find independence and love in a critical society.

The Idea of You provides a detailed look at how age differences shape romantic relationships, showing societal expectations and personal challenges. The dialogue between the main characters, Hayes and Solène, illustrates how they struggle to balance their relationship with the realities imposed by their age difference. In this example, Hayes, who is a much younger celebrity, tries to normalize their relationship despite external pressures saying:

Hayes: *"It would just be me, and we could hang out like normal people."*

Solène: *"Um, yeah, it's not gonna work for me. This was fun, but now it's, uh, not."* (The Idea of You, 1:14:53).

Much has changed in this conversation. Solène's response shows an internal conflict, which is a result of social stigma and personal pressure caused by being in a relationship that goes against societal standards. This pressure to conform is stronger for women because age differences often judge them. Older men are often praised in such relationships, while women are often considered desperate or inappropriate (Collisson, De Leon, 2020). Media portrayals further compound these pressures, framing older women in age-gap relationships as predatory or unworthy of love (Sontag, 2018).

Solène's decision to end the relationship later in the film illustrates the emotional burden she faces. She says:

Solène: *"I can't do this anymore. Us, our relationship, I ... I can't do it anymore. It's Izz. It's too much for her. I mean, it's ... insane."*

Hayes: *"Okay, let me just, um, think about this for a second."* (The Idea of You, 1:39:05)

This dialogue reveals how Solène's role as a mother and societal judgment clash, leaving her feeling as though her desires must take a backseat to her daughter's emotional well-being. Inter-generational relationships are often complicated by family obligations and the difficulty younger partners face when integrating into the older partner's established life (Simsekli et al., 2020). For Solène, the sacrifices required to maintain the relationship are too great, particularly when it begins to affect her daughter, Izz. This highlights a recurring societal expectation where women, especially mothers, are expected to prioritize their families above their happiness (Barr et al., 2023).

Additionally, the film explores how gendered double standards amplify the challenges in age-gap relationships. While older men dating younger women are often perceived as distinguished or desirable, older women in similar relationships face criticism and marginalization (Rudman, Glick, 2021). Women like Solène face an unequal burden because of these perceptions or stigmas. They must deal with judgments about their choices about relationships and the emotional consequences of these perceptions on their families and children. The influence of social pressure explains Solène's decision to end the relationship.

Their relationship is further complicated by Hayes' widespread popularity. Their relationship has become a public concern in an increasingly connected world, making Solène fear the dire consequences for herself and her daughter. This is related to the opinion of Simsekli et al. (Simsekli et al., 2020) that society often exaggerates the problems faced by a relationship that is not in line

with existing standards, making personal problems into social debates. Solène does not want to continue her relationship, indicating that she wants to protect herself and her daughter from further judgment, even if it means sacrificing her happiness.

Romantic relationships with obvious age gap differences somehow invite social rejection. This leads to gender inequality that manifests in various ways, including stereotypes formed from social context and social structures (Gurieva et al., 2022: 66). These stereotypes then construct certain expectations in romantic relationships. *The Idea of You* (2024) has presented how age gap romantic relationship does matter in patriarchal society where their relationship is underestimated, especially in terms of sexuality and attractiveness. Older men are frequently perceived as attractive or authoritative, while older women are often negatively judged and considered to have lost social value (Liu, 2023: 178). This injustice is reflected in how Solène's relationship with Hayes is perceived. When a man in his 40s dates a younger woman, it is rarely seen as strange or problematic. However, when an older woman, like Solène, enters a romantic relationship with a younger man, she becomes an easy target for harsh criticism.

"If the roles are reversed you think anyone else would give a shit? would judge?" (The Idea of You, 1:16:38)

Hayes' dialogue strongly suggests that men have greater freedom in choosing romantic partners than women, who face intense social scrutiny. When a man in his 40s dates a younger woman, people rarely raise an eyebrow. But when an older woman like Solène is romantically involved with a younger man, she immediately becomes a target of harsh criticism. This attitude not only affects women's self-confidence but also reinforces gender norms that disadvantage and restrict women from expressing their romantic or sexual preferences (Vanderheiden, 2021). Gender-role asserts that gender representation in society is largely shaped by the distribution of social roles based on biological differences (Eagly, Wood, 1991). Women are often associated with being weak and in need of protection due to their biological ability to give birth, while men are perceived as strong and responsible (Gurieva et al., 2022: 66). Men are considered to be in charge of earning a living and making important decisions, while women are responsible for caring for the household and children (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2024). These views form the unwritten rules of romantic relationships, where men are expected to be older and dominant.

Age gap relationships (older women, younger men) are considered inappropriate in society and unlikely to succeed (Sela et al., 2018), a perspective directly contested by the film. The narrative underscores this inequality by juxtaposing two contrasting relationships. Solène and Hayes experience constant social pressure and uncomfortable interactions because of their age difference, with Solène being judged more harshly as the older woman. In stark contrast, Daniel and Eve –where the man is older –face no such criticism. This indicates that there is a potential for men's responses to women who support traditional gender roles to be more positive than when women challenge them (Domen et al., 2022). In other words, when women conform to established norms, men feel more comfortable, which is why Daniel and Eve's relationship is freer from social stigma because it is perceived as conforming to established social expectations. It also highlights the deeply rooted gender patriarchal nature in how we perceive romantic relationships.

Social norms influenced by patriarchy play an important role in shaping gender roles in relationships, especially romantic relationships. Patriarchy can be defined as a male-dominated hierarchical structure, where men are culturally and socially placed in a higher position than women (Chairunnisa, Hafizh, 2024). This structure creates certain expectations regarding the ideal relationship. A common expectation in romantic relationships is that men should be older, dominant, and take the lead, while women are seen as being younger, supportive, and submissive. This belief aligns with the traditional patriarchal view, where men are often associated with independence, power, and authority, while women are expected to be nurturing, supportive, and follow their partners' lead (Rosalind, 2017). In the relationship between Solène and Hayes, where Solène is the older woman, their relationship contradicts these social expectations. These social norms become a trigger for external pressure on women to conform to gender and age stereotypes considered ideal. This is evident in the dialogue between Hayes and Solène:

Hayes: So, when can I see you again?

Solène: I can't do this

Hayes: Why?

Solène: Because you're you and I'm me and we just don't fit (The Idea of You, 47:52)

When Solène says, “Because you're you and I'm me and we just don't fit,” it can be interpreted as a result of societal views that dictate men must be older and women younger, thereby potentially viewing their relationship as inappropriate. Individuals who do not follow traditional relationship norms living in societies with lower gender equality tend to receive less social support (Lys, Adamczyk, 2024). The phrase “don't fit” explains that Solène feels their relationship does not align with social norms. The patriarchal culture underlying these rules creates inequality between men and women. This inequality is normalized, indirectly pressuring women to conform to these norms. In romantic relationships, women often have to sacrifice their desires to meet long-established social expectations (Siva et al., 2023: 4). Therefore, Solène and Hayes's relationship, which does not follow this pattern, is considered unusual. Solène's rejection of her relationship with Hayes can be seen as a consequence of deeply rooted social pressures. She was raised in an environment with unwritten rules about how a romantic relationship should proceed, and consequently, her personal choices are indirectly influenced by these social constructs.

Not only does the age difference impact the relationship and society, but it can also affect the individuals in the relationship. Women were rarely willing to date younger men, but they were willing to date a man up to ten years above them (Lehmiller, Christopher, 2008). This statement shows that women in relationships will feel more comfortable publishing the relationship if the partner is older, and tend to be shy about being open if the partner is younger. In the movie *The Idea of You*, there is a scene when they fight shows that Solène feels embarrassed if people know she is dating Hayes who is 16 years younger than her.

Hayes: “So what you're um you're ashamed with me? is that it?”

Solène: “I am ashamed.” (The Idea of You, 1:16:51).

This scene highlighted that age difference can be a factor that makes individuals feel embarrassed and also fearful of other people's judgment on their relationship. In this case, people feeling uncomfortable or judging women who date younger men shows that society expects men to be older, more experienced, or in charge in relationships. In this case, the equality in the sexual field has not been completely achieved (Gómez-Berrocal et al., 2022). Even if society doesn't judge relationships with a big age difference, people in those relationships can still feel upset if someone personally criticizes them, this is supported by research that says people in age-gap relationships may still feel hurt by personal criticism, even if society as a whole doesn't have a negative view of such relationships. (Smisek, 2019, as cited in Scolpino, Steele, 2024).

According to other studies, those in age-gap relationships who experienced greater societal rejection or judgment were more likely to end their relationship (Lehmiller, Agnew, 2006, quoted in Scolpino, Steele, 2024). In the movie, the characters also broke up for that reason.

Izzy: “Mom, why would you break up with a talented, kind feminist?” (The Idea of You, 1:26:25).

This scene shows that even though they wanted each other, the insults they received from Hayes friends made Solène feel offended and finally decide to break up. Here, societal expectations about relationships like the idea that men should be older than their female partners still have a powerful influence on Solène's feelings and decisions.

This claim is backed by research showing that rejection by one or more partners of an age-gap relationship by their social network was more destructive to the relationship than rejection by society at large. This suggests that people in age-gap relationships might be more resilient to social stigma than to criticism from friends and family (Lehmiller, Agnew, 2006, as cited in Scolpino, Steele 2024).

Age-gap relationships between older women and younger men often go against traditional social expectations, showing how personal and societal pressures can shape relationships. Society usually expects men to be older than their partners, linking age with qualities like wisdom, stability, and financial success (Utomo, 2014). For these reasons, relationships where the woman is older are often judged unfairly and seen as unusual. This anxiety might happen because people feel they need to change themselves to fit into a relationship that is not widely accepted (Roberts et al., 2005 as cited in Chopik, Edelstein, 2014). At the same time, being in a committed, long-term relationship can help reduce these feelings by creating a sense of safety and support (Davila et al., 1999 as cited in Chopik, Edelstein, 2014).

Women in these relationships often feel uncomfortable and self-conscious about how others view them. Many said they feel embarrassed when people find out about the age difference. Smolak, Murnen (2002) argue that “the societal pressure women face to conform to traditional romantic roles can lead to negative self-perception and emotional stress when they break from

these norms.” This is in line with past studies, which show that women are judged more harshly than men when they date younger partners. Another research about Ambivalent Sexism Theory said that traditional sexism is divided into two types, hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. The hostile component can mean a negative stigma of women because it is assumed that those who do not follow traditional roles, such as being a possible threat to male dominance and masculinity (Glick, Fiske, 2001, as cited in Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2020). Solène, who is older in a relationship, is potentially more dominant, and it causes negative stigma from people. This happened to Solène, who was criticized by many for having a nontraditional relationship with Hayes due to their age difference. Meanwhile, her ex-husband was free to cheat on her, and everyone knew it, but they chose to keep it a secret.

The role of men in this kind of relationship is also impacted by social stigma. They can also feel uncomfortable with the societal stigma of being a younger individual, where usually men are expected to be a masculine leader who is generally older. Stigmatization of age-gap relationships can impact those people’s mental health negatively (Silva, 2019 as cited in Scolpino, Steele, 2024). The fact that Hayes also feels sad and stressed by people around him who indirectly criticize his relationship shows that he is affected by the stigma. This idea is supported by research that states that individuals in relationships may face stigma from others and that stigma and stereotyping increase the risk of mental health problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression. (Cupach, Spitzberg, 2011; Lehmler, Agnew, 2006; Smisek, 2019). This shows that societal pressure and criticism from the closest people can have a bad influence on these relationships.

There is a scene in the film where Solène and Hayes openly express their relationship despite society’s scorn for them. The scene, with a song playing in the background (The Idea of You 1:30:04 –1:30:33), depicts Solène’s decision to no longer let societal expectations control her actions. This scene shows how Solène finally decides to continue her relationship with Hayes, she also believes in her decision and goes against the norms that exist in society. This scene is very contrasting with the previous scene in the film, where Solène can laugh freely and cover her shame, this also illustrates the process of her self-development. She also shows the audience how important it is to put your desires first and choose happiness over fear of criticism from society.

Although there is no dialogue in the scene, the depiction of Solène smiling and holding Hayes’ hand in public provides powerful evidence. It defies the idea that women should adapt themselves to societal expectations about relationships and age. It also shows that people can overcome strong gender stereotypes. Negotiations between societal expectations and personal desires often reflect personal decisions in relationships, and the role of the individuals is crucial in coping with external pressures (Sánchez et al., 2017: 6-8).

Solène’s choice to end her relationship with Hayes to make Izz, her daughter, a priority in her life can be said to be a critique of patriarchy and not to be inferior to social expectations.

Solène: “I can’t do this anymore. Us, our relationship, I can’t do it anymore. It’s Izz”

Hayes: “Okay, um ...”

Solène: “It’s just too much for her. I mean, she didn’t sign up for any of this, and it’s too much for her. And I have to put her first.”

Hayes: “Okay.” (The Idea of You, 1:39:04)

The dialogue spoken by Solène shows that she is more concerned with her child than her relationship with Hayes. Although the relationship between the two couples ran aground, the cause was not the existing social expectations, but it was a decision she thought was best for all their conditions. From this, it means that she is a woman who despite responding to social expectations, still has control over her own life, which can be said as a criticism of patriarchy which often considers women do not have the right to manage their own lives (Khaerati, Iskandar, 2023: 52). Patriarchy places women in a more passive role as if they do not have the freedom to make choices in their lives, especially in relationships (Pillado, 2023). Studies on values in relationships show that people who uphold the value of caring for others tend to have happier relationships (van der Wal et al., 2023) It is not because they sacrifice themselves but because they understand exactly what matters to them. Solène is one of them. She doesn’t stay in a relationship just to maintain a certain image or avoid the gaze of others. She chose to walk away from her romantic relationship with Hayes because she knew that there were more important things than just maintaining a relationship that was no longer in line with her priorities. By ending the relationship with Hayes for the sake of her child, Solène proves that she is not inferior to existing social expectations by determining what is best for herself without feeling bound by the roles that have been chosen by society.

4. Results

The study reveals that age-gap relationships, as depicted in *The Idea of You*, highlight the subtle balance between societal expectations and personal struggles. The film emphasizes how societal norms and stereotypes heavily influence relationships where the woman is older. Solène, the main character, faces societal judgment and internal conflict, which highly depicts the challenges women in such relationships often experience. These findings align with (Sánchez et al., 2017), who argue relationship dynamics are shaped by external social pressures, especially when the couples can't live up to expectations. Since women are supposed to put their families and society's approval above their happiness, the movie does a good job of showing how these pressures significantly impact them.

Other studies show that social expectations manifested through patriarchy can influence how a romantic relationship where women who are older than men are judged by society. The patriarchy that exists in society assumes that men should lead and be dominant in a relationship, and women should complement men (Li, 2025) which then leads to the belief men should be older than women when in a romantic relationship. From this patriarchal understanding, social expectations are formed that create inequality, where relationships between older men and younger women are accepted without much question, while the opposite relationship, where the woman is older, is often criticized. As stated by Rosida and Soraya (Rosida, Soraya, 2017: 4) "In patriarchal culture especially, women are subordinate as a result of social construction." These social expectations do not come for free but are contributed by cultural norms. As a result, women in these relationships are burdened by the pressure of fulfilling social expectations, even though this is often contrary to their feelings and desires. Women are also more limited in their emotional and social freedom in relationships.

This research also shows how societal expectations and personal struggles affect age-gap relationships, especially when the woman is older. The age gap in a relationship can make a person feel ashamed of the criticism and views of those closest to them, especially if the woman is older. This is illustrated in the problems experienced by Solène during her relationship with Hayes who is much younger than her. Solène felt embarrassed when everyone found out about her relationship. Research supports this opinion and states that people in such relationships face more criticism, such criticism hurts both the person and the relationship (Smisek, 2019, as cited in Scolpino, Steele, 2024). The end of Solène's relationship with Hayes happened partly because of negative comments from Hayes' friends, even though they both loved each other. This shows how much social pressure can influence decisions in age-gap relationships. This phenomenon shows that disapproval from loved ones is more damaging than societal disapproval.

5. Conclusion

The Idea of You (2024) film has shown how social expectations and gender norms have a significant role in romantic relationships. This critique of the double standards where older men are favored over older women. The unfair treatment of older women reflects how embedded patriarchal values can create social pressure for older women in romantic relationships with younger men. Social norms and expectations seemingly lead to gender inequality where older women with younger men in romantic relationships are unaccepted within society. This film highlights romantic autonomy but at the same time shows that social norms and expectations are much more powerful than individual love. This research contributes to media literacy education by encouraging viewers to question why society often holds double standards: why is an older man with a younger woman more widely accepted, while older women with younger men are often subject to ridicule or suspicion? By fostering critical thinking, viewers recognize the complexities of the portrayals of relationships between older women and younger men. Also, this research facilitates individuals to think critically about the messages conveyed through media representations, promotes a more inclusive media landscape, and creates an understanding of romantic autonomy.

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