

My Youth is Yours: Exploring the Complexities of Significant Age Gap - Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examines the experiences of Filipino couples in marriages where the woman is significantly older than the man, a relationship dynamic that remains understudied in the Philippine setting. Through semi-structured interviews with ten couples from Southern Cebu, the study explores the challenges they encounter, the dynamics within their relationships, and the coping strategies they use to navigate cultural and social pressures. Findings show that couples face family disapproval, social stereotyping, financial strain, jealousy, and concerns related to childlessness. Despite these difficulties, they rely on coping practices rooted in prayer, reassurance, emotional openness, humility, and shared routines. These strategies help sustain their relationship despite ongoing tension and external judgment. Themes of resilience, faith, and mutual support emerged, reflecting how Filipino values shape their ability to endure challenges. The study offers a culturally grounded perspective on age-gap marriages and illustrates how couples maintain stability within a context shaped by strong family and religious norms.

Keywords: Age-gap relationships, marital resilience, coping mechanisms, Filipino couples, case study

INTRODUCTION

While most relationships are easily understood, large age-gap relationships exist in a world of intrigue—where love challenges conventions, years tell more than just time, and every shared moment becomes a story of resilience and devotion waiting to be uncovered.

Romantic relationships are complex social bonds shaped by emotional, psychological, and sociocultural forces. Although love is often described as universal, the ways in which relationships are formed, interpreted, and sustained are embedded within particular cultural norms and social contexts. Intimate partnerships develop not only through personal attraction and emotional connection but also through broader expectations and structural influences that guide partner selection and relational behavior (Drury et al., 2017; Berscheid & Regan, 2005; Finkel et al., 2017). Consequently, romantic relationships take diverse forms across settings, reflecting both individual agency and culturally patterned values.

Among these diverse forms, age-gap relationships—commonly defined as romantic partnerships with an age difference of ten years or more—have attracted sustained scholarly attention. Research conducted largely in Western contexts indicates that while such relationships are not uncommon, they remain less prevalent than agesimilar unions (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006, 2007, 2008). Demographic data suggest that approximately 8–9% of married couples in the United States and Canada experience significant age differences, most frequently involving older men partnered with younger women (Boyd & Li, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Evolutionary and social psychological accounts further note that men and women tend to prefer partners with modest age differences of two to three years (Buss, 1989; United Nations, 2000). Relationships that exceed these norms, however, often attract heightened public attention and scrutiny.

Large age differences frequently provoke social stigma and stereotyping. Older women partnered with younger men are often labeled “cougars,” while younger women with older men are portrayed as “gold diggers,” narratives that imply predation or opportunism rather than authentic emotional connection (Turner, 2008; Voo,

2007). Popular media reinforce reductive labels such as “toyboy,” “sugar daddy,” and “gold digger,” trivializing the emotional legitimacy of these partnerships and positioning them as socially deviant (Gallo, 2019; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010; Vanderheiden, 2021). Despite such pressures, empirical studies indicate that many age-gap couples report relationship satisfaction comparable to or even higher than that of age-similar couples. Open communication, adaptability across life stages, and deliberate coping strategies have been identified as key protective factors that help partners manage generational differences and external judgment (Carol & Warren, 1996; Lehmilller & Agnew, 2007; Monge et al., 2021; Proulx et al., 2006). Some couples also resist stigmatizing labels by defining their relationships around shared values and mutual respect rather than external expectations (Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006). Collectively, this body of work highlights both the challenges and resilience associated with age-diverse partnerships.

However, the majority of this literature emerges from Western, individualistic frameworks that interpret relationship formation primarily as a matter of personal autonomy and romantic preference. Such perspectives may not fully capture relationship dynamics in collectivistic societies, where intimate decisions are embedded within family networks and community expectations. In the Philippines, interpersonal behavior is shaped by indigenous cultural constructs articulated within *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipino Psychology), which emphasizes understanding behavior through local concepts rather than imported Western models (Enriquez, 1992). Central to this framework is *kapwa*, or shared identity, which conceptualizes the self as fundamentally relational and interconnected with others. Decisions about partnership are therefore situated within family and community considerations rather than purely individual choice. Complementary values such as *hiya* (sensitivity to social propriety or shame) and *utang na loob* (reciprocal obligation and gratitude) further regulate behavior by encouraging social harmony, mutual responsibility, and collective approval (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). Together, these constructs suggest that romantic relationships in the Filipino context may be evaluated more pragmatically, with considerations of stability, maturity, and family compatibility often taking precedence alongside emotional attachment.

Although emerging reports suggest increasing openness among Filipinos toward age-diverse partnerships, systematic scholarly research on age-gap relationships within the Philippine setting remains limited. The predominance of Western-based evidence, therefore, leaves an important gap in understanding how such relationships are negotiated within Filipino cultural and social realities.

Addressing this gap, the present case study examined the relational complexities, contextual challenges, and coping dynamics of Filipino couples in age-gap relationships in Southern Cebu. By integrating established relationship scholarship with indigenous Filipino social theories, the study provided a culturally grounded account of how age differences were interpreted, negotiated, and sustained within the Philippine context. In doing so, it contributed localized empirical insights to the broader literature on intimate partnerships and expanded theoretical understandings of age-gap relationships beyond Western frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presented the methodology that was employed to explore the complexities of age-gap relationships in Southern Cebu, Philippines. The focus was on understanding the experiences of couples in age-gap relationships, particularly the challenges they faced, their psychological, emotional, and power dynamics, their coping mechanisms and strategies for success, and cultural perspectives. This chapter outlined the research design, participants, research setting, measures/instruments, procedures, data collection, data analysis, data management, ethical considerations, and reflexivity.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of individuals in age gap relationships and explore the complexities of such partnerships." Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for exploring real-world phenomena that involve human emotions, behaviors, and interactions, as it allows for the collection of rich, narrative data that reflects participants' personal insights and perspectives (Tenny et al., 2022). This approach is essential for uncovering the personal and often complex experiences that shape intimate relationships, especially those that differ from societal norms. Meanwhile, the case study design is a valuable

methodological approach as it enables a comprehensive and contextualized investigation of individuals within their real-life settings. It captures the complexity of age-gap relationships by examining various influencing factors, such as cultural attitudes, social judgments, power dynamics, and communication patterns, within their specific social and relational environments (Yin, 2009). By focusing on real cases, the study aimed to provide a holistic understanding of how individuals navigate and make meaning of their experiences in age-disparate partnerships.

Participants

The study involved married couples in age-gap relationships, selected through convenience sampling. Eligible couples had a significant age difference of twelve to fifteen years, with the woman being the older partner. This sampling approach aimed to capture a range of perspectives while facilitating an in-depth exploration of the relational dynamics within such partnerships. All participants were of legal age and currently engaged in longterm marriages lasting five or more years. Recruitment was conducted through face-to-face interactions and/or online forums, with informed consent obtained from both spouses. In alignment with Creswell's (2013) guidance on case study research, which recommends 4 to 10 participants for multiple-case designs, a sample size within this range was adopted to ensure depth of insight without compromising manageability. This number is also consistent with qualitative research norms that emphasize rich, contextual understanding over statistical generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). All ethical guidelines were strictly observed, and the study was conducted following approval from the appropriate research ethics committee.

Research Setting

The study took place in Southern Cebu, Philippines, focusing on couples in age-gap relationships. Data collection was conducted in environments that prioritize the comfort, privacy, and confidentiality of the participants. Researchers worked collaboratively with participants to select settings that promote ease and openness, ensuring their emotional well-being throughout the interview process. Potential settings for the interviews included participants' homes, quiet cafés, or parks, as well as virtual platforms for online interviews, if preferred. This adaptable approach allowed for a comfortable experience while maintaining the integrity and rigor of the research process.

Research Instrument

The research instruments and materials for the study were methodically designed to enhance participants' experiences. The primary data collection tool was a semi-structured interview comprising both closed and opened questions. This guide will focus on understanding the dynamics of age-gap relationships, including how the age difference influences relationship dynamics, societal perceptions, and personal growth. Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire to gather essential profile data, including age, gender, occupation, duration of the relationship, and information about any children. These demographics help contextualize participants' experiences and ensure a diverse representation of age-gap relationships.

High-quality audio recording equipment was used to accurately capture the interviews. Participants were informed about the recording process before the interviews, ensuring transparency and consent. Detailed informed consent documents will outline the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and measures to maintain participant anonymity. Participants acknowledged their understanding of these documents before the interviews. To help participants prepare, they received an email with the interview questions and guidelines three days before their scheduled interviews.

Procedure

This section outlined the process followed in conducting the study, specifically detailing the data collection, data analysis, and data management phases.

Data Collection

Before the actual data collection began, researchers contacted participants, consisting of couples in age-gap relationships, via email or messaging platforms. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, ensuring they understand the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and how their data will be used and protected. Participants will receive an overview of the interview process and will be encouraged to ask any questions.

During the interviews, which were scheduled based on participants' availability, researchers will utilize both face-to-face meetings and online video calls. A semi-structured format was employed, allowing researchers to pose both open and closed-ended questions to gather comprehensive insights into relationship challenges, psychological, emotional, and power dynamics, societal perceptions and coping mechanisms and strategies. With participants' consent, audio recordings will be made, and notes were taken to ensure accurate data capture. Follow-up questions will be asked based on participants' responses to encourage deeper discussion.

After the interviews are conducted, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to facilitate thorough analysis. The transcripts will be stored securely, ensuring that participant anonymity is maintained. Identifiable information was removed, and a coding system will be employed to link data back to participants while preserving confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The data in this study were analyzed using the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), a rigorous six-phase process designed to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within qualitative data. This method was ideal for exploring the complexities of significant age-gap relationships, as it offered flexibility, depth, and a participant-centered interpretation of the data.

In the *first phase*, familiarization with the data, researchers immersed themselves in the collected interview transcripts by reading and re-reading the content multiple times. This step ensured that they developed a deep understanding of the participants' narratives and began to identify initial observations, emerging ideas, and key emotional expressions. The *second phase* involved generating initial codes by systematically working through the data and identifying meaningful segments that were relevant to the research questions. These codes were both data-driven, arising naturally from the participants' accounts, and theory-driven, reflecting the study's focus on relationship dynamics, challenges, and emotional resilience in age-gap relationships.

The *third phase* involved searching for themes by grouping related codes together, transitioning from the descriptive to the interpretive. The themes represented recurring ideas, underlying concepts, or significant emotional experiences shared across participants. A thematic map was created to visually organize the relationships among codes, sub-themes, and overarching themes, allowing for clearer conceptualization of the data.

In the *fourth phase*, the researchers reviewed the themes to ensure they were coherent, well-supported by the data, and accurately reflected the research objectives. During this phase, themes that were either too broad or lack sufficient supporting evidence were refined, combined, or discarded. This stage ensured that the themes were distinct and meaningfully represented the data collected. In the *fifth phase*, the themes were defined and named, ensuring that each theme is analytically rich and well-articulated. The researchers assigned concise, descriptive names to each theme, ensuring clarity and analytical depth, and allowing for a structured framework that supported the final analysis.

The *final phase* of the analysis involved writing the report, where the researchers wove the themes into a coherent narrative. Extracts from the interview transcripts were used to illustrate each theme, grounding the analysis in the participants' own words. The report interpreted the significance of each theme, considering the broader research questions and existing literature on age-gap relationships. The findings provided an in-depth understanding of how couples in significant age-gap relationships navigated societal perceptions, personal challenges, and emotional intimacy. Through this process, the study aims to offer insights into the complexities

of these relationships, contributing valuable knowledge to the broader discourse on relationships and societal norms.

Data Management

For the effective management of data collected in the study examining the complexities of age-gap relationships, the following strategies were implemented to ensure the integrity, confidentiality, and accessibility of research data:

Confidentiality: Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Any identifiable information or contextual clues that could reveal the participants’ identities was removed from all transcripts and data reports to maintain anonymity.

Data Storage: A centralized digital folder system was established to organize all research materials, including transcripts, consent forms, audio/video recordings, and field notes. All data was stored in a secure folder with restricted access, ensuring that only the researchers could access the files. Digital data was regularly backed up on a secure external hard drive, which was stored in a separate, safe location to protect against data loss.

Data Use: The data collected was utilized exclusively for this research study. Findings presented in the study were anonymized to ensure that no participant could be identified based on the shared data.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of interviews conducted with ten married couples in age-gap relationships, specifically those in which the woman is older than the man, residing in the southern part of Cebu, Philippines. The study aimed to explore the complexities these couples experience in navigating their relationship dynamics, addressing challenges, and developing coping mechanisms to sustain their partnership. Through careful examination of the participants’ narratives, several themes emerged, revealing how couples perceive, experience, and manage the realities brought by their age difference. These findings provide a deeper understanding of how they support one another, maintain emotional connection, and adapt to societal expectations, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of age-gap relationships within the sociocultural context of South Cebu, Philippines.

Table 1. Relationship Dynamics

Themes	Subthemes
Preference	Younger Partner Seeks Maturity/Guidance Older Partner Seeks Control/Obedience Love/Fate Over Age
Communication	Open and Trust-Based Communication Conflict Expression and Communication Barriers
Decision -making	Collaborative and Negotiated Decision Making Authority-Based Decision Making
Sharing of Roles and Responsibilities	Division Of Household and Physical Labor Financial Roles and Resource Management

Table 1 presents the relationship dynamics of couples in age-gap relationships, focusing on communication, decision-making, and sharing of responsibilities. It also reflects power dynamics, showing how differences in age and experience can create imbalances, with some partners taking the lead in decisions or household management while others assume a more supportive role. This provides a clear view of how authority, influence, and negotiation shape daily interactions and overall relationship functioning.

The first emergent theme, Preference, highlights how partner selection and relationship among the couples. From the basis of all interviews, participants have revealed that their choice of partner was deeply shaped by perceptions of maturity, their authority, and their “destiny”. Many Male Participants expressed a preference for older and more mature partners, viewing age as a source of emotional stability and guidance that could help them grow and develop responsibility within their relationship.

[...] Ang laki gyud dugay siya mo mature, mao na nga mas nangita ko og mas mature nako kay para ma mature pud ko." (Men take longer to mature, so I looked for someone more mature than me to help me mature too.) - Couple A. Husband

[...] Mas gusto nako magulang nako akong mapares. Mas maayo man ang maguwang kay dili ako ang modala, siya ang modala nako." I prefer someone older to be my partner. It's better if they're older because I don't have to be the one leading, they will be the one to lead me.) -Couple C. Husband

[...] Wala koy plano nga mag-uyab-uyab sauna. Pero pag nagka ila nami, mas ganahan ko ug mas maguwang kay mas mature." (I had no plans to date before. But when we met, I preferred someone older because they're more mature.) -Couple F, Husband

This indicates that maturity was highly valued as it symbolized wisdom and stability, allowing younger partners to learn and mature through experience. On the other hand, some older female participants preferred younger partners due to the sense of control and obedience it offered; however, as their relationships progressed, they recognized that love and responsibility extend beyond age differences and are rooted instead in individual character and mutual respect.

[...] Mas gusto nako sauna nga manghud kay para dili ko suklan" (I prefer someone younger so that they won't go against me) -Couple C, Wife

[...] Ang gusto gyud nako sauna kay labaw nakog edad kay responsable. Unya wako magdahom na magka uyab mi niya kay bata man siya gud kaysa nako. Unya nisugot pud ko kay maayo man siya modiskarte. Nasuta man nako na wala sa edad ba, sa tao gyud diay kay naa may mas dakog edad pero bululyagon." (What I really wanted before was someone older than me because they are usually more responsible. I never thought we would become a couple since he was younger than me. But I agreed because he was resourceful and good at handling things. I realized that love is not really about age, but about the person, since there are even older men who can be irresponsible.) -Couple B, Wife

Several participants also shared that their relationships were guided by fate or divine will, emphasizing that genuine love is not bound by age but by emotional connection and acceptance.

[...] Okay ra bisan unsa, dawaton ra nako kung unsa ihatag sa Ginoo." (It's fine with me, I'll accept whatever God gives.) -Couple H, Wife

[...] ako ga depende raman ko kung unsa ang ihatag sa ginoo, wala raman ko gahuna huna" (As for me, I just depend on whatever God gives, I don't really think much about it.) -Couple G, Husband

[...] Wala raman ko gadahum na ingani, nagkataon nagkatagpo lang jud mi" (For me I never thought we'll be wed, it was just fate) -Couple D, Wife

Secondly, Communication emerged as a vital theme in sustaining relationship harmony among couples. Across the interviews, participants emphasized the importance of open and trust-based communication, where mutual honesty and transparency allowed for deeper connection and their emotional intimacy.

For instance, Couples described how they maintain an environment of openness and often treat one another not only as spouses but as best friends.

[...] Open communication ra gyud mi, and importante sa relationship kay kanang mura ramog friend sa balay. Dili ingun na husband and wife dapat bestfriend mo. So open ko, bisan unsa akoang i-open niya mga personal and trial sa work, ma open ragyud na nako niya, niya siya pud open rapud siya nako. Walay mga secrets." (We really have open communication, and it's important to be like friends at home—husband and wife, but also best friends. I'm open about everything, even personal matters and work challenges, and she is open with me too. No secrets.) -Couple A, Husband

[...] Mga isturyaanay na magkasinabut gyud, di man mi anang mag-sininghag nga istorya, dili masuk-anon na istorya" (We talk calmly so that we understand each other, we don't want to talk to each harshly.) -Couple J, Wife

[...] Mag-istorya rami parti sa amoang panginabuhì, dayun magsinabtanay sa usa'g usa, okay raman pud ang amoa nga pag-puyo." (We just talk about our livelihood and then understand each other. -Couple I, Wife

These statements reflect how open dialogue, patience, and mutual support form the foundation of strong and harmonious relationships. This pattern reflects a conscious effort among partners to maintain peace and emotional regulation during conflict, underscoring how maturity and patience are integral to communication patterns in long term relationships.

Another emerging subtheme is the Conflict Expression and Communication barriers in which it emphasized how couples often struggle with misunderstandings as they have different ways of expressing and handling disagreements. Couples expressed,

[...] Mag-istorya mi, ug naa'y di mauyonan maglalis unya ig kahuman maayo rasad. Kani siya kusog mankaayo mag-yawyaw ako ra siya ingnun na pauli nalang sa inyuha oy unya balik lang ug wala naka'y yaw-yaw" (We talk, and if there's something we don't agree on, we argue, but afterward it's fine again. He really nags a lot, so I just tell him, 'Go home first and just come back when you're done nagging.) -Couple G, Wife

[...] Ako trabaho man, niya siya pud kay trabaho. Anha nami ig kagabie mag istoryaanay pero usahay mulikay siya dili makig-istorya." (I have work and he also goes to work. We only got the chance to talk during night time but sometimes he avoids me and does not talk to me.) -Couple D, Wife

[...] Sultian nako siya nga dili ni maayo. Pero musupak gyud siya... mao nga masuko gyud ko, mudako akong tingog niya. Inigkahuman, ma-okay ra mi." (I tell him that something is not good. But he really argues back, which makes me upset, so I end up raising my voice at him. Afterwards, we're okay again.) -Couple B, Wife

[...] mulakaw rako usahay, para di na mudako ang amoa nga away." (Sometimes I walk out so that our fight won't go big.) -Couple D, Husband

The third theme, which is Decision-Making among the couples, revealed the coexistence of both collaborative and authority-based structures, shaped largely by age, gender, and individual experience.

The first and most prevalent subtheme was the Collaborative and Negotiated Decision-Making. Partners emphasized that decisions were discussed openly, reflecting equality and shared responsibility.

[...] So naa mi mutual decision dili ra pwede ra ako ra ang mo-decision." (We make mutual decisions; it can't just be me.) -Couple A, Wife

[...] Istoryahan usa pa mabuhat ang desisyon. Mag-respetuhanay mi sa usag-usa nga opinion." (We really talk things through before making a decision. We respect each other's opinions.) -Couple C, Husband

[...] Neutral... magsinabtanay gud mi. Mag-adjust mi sa usag-usa ug among susihon kung unsay mas maayo.” (It’s more neutral, we really come to an understanding. We adjust to each other and check what’s best.) -Couple C, Wife

They noted that no single person should make decisions independently, and mutual agreement was essential to maintaining peace and respect. This practice extended to everyday matters such as household planning, financial management, and family responsibilities.

However, the subtheme of Authority-based Decision-making surfaced prominently reflects how decisionmaking in the relationship is often influenced by one partner taking a more dominant or guiding role. Decisions tend to follow the judgment of the partner seen as more experienced or capable, which can create an imbalance but also provide structure. Despite this, couples usually try to maintain harmony by considering each other’s opinions and finding a balance between guidance and mutual agreement. Most couples expressed,

[...] Aw, kung naa nay desisyonan, ako gyud ang masunod kay mas maguwang man ko. Pero kung mas maguwang pa ang akong bana o kaparis, siya pud ang masunod.” (Well, when there’s a decision to make, I’m usually the one to be followed because I’m older. But if my husband or partner is older than me, then he should be the one to be followed.) -Couple H, Wife

[...] Makatabi rami ig padung namo higda, unya ako man ang mu open about ana niya. Kung unsa akoha decision mu-angay rapud na siya nako usahay” (We only get to talk when we get to lie down in our bed and it’s usually me who opens the topic. So that’s why sometimes he does not argue with the decisions I suggest) -Couple D, Wife

[...] Para nako, ang amoa nga decision magkaparehas unya kun unsa’y maayo muuyon ra sad siya, wala rami gasupakay kun unsa’y kaayuhan sa amoa nga kinabuhi okay ra kaayo siya nga mo uyon sa sugyot sa amoa nga pagpuyo” (For me, our decisions are the same, and if something is good, he agrees with it. We don’t go against each other when it comes to what’s best for our life—he’s very willing to go along with suggestions for our way of living.) -Couple I, Wife

These negotiations reflected emotional intelligence—partners understood when to assert and when to yield, ensuring that decisions benefited both individuals.

The fourth and last theme, Sharing of Roles and Responsibilities, emphasized how couples divide daily tasks and responsibilities based on what each partner can best manage. In the Subtheme division of household and physical labor, partners usually take on roles that match their abilities, comfort levels, or availability, allowing them to maintain balance in their routine.

[...] “Since working mother ko, sayo kog mata, so limpyu, magluto, mag prepare sa anak, ug sa bana. Niya inig ka evening muabot ko same routine sa morning. So, we still have time to talk before we sleep.” (As a working mom, I wake up early to clean, cook, prep our child and my husband. In the evening, same routine—and we still have time to talk before sleeping.) -Couple A, Wife

[...] Mostly ako man ang mangita. Ako ang mag-hapnig sa iyahnang gamit, usahay iyang labhanan.”

(Mostly, it’s me who finds a way. I organize his things and sometimes do his laundry.) - Couple D, Wife [...] Kasagaran ako gyud ang mubuhay sa mga buluhaton. Usahay kay magpatabang ko niya.” (I usually do most chores. Sometimes I ask for his help.) - Couple H, Wife [...] Lain-lain mi og trabaho. Usahay siya manglimpyo, ako mangalos og tubig sa kadlawon. Dili man mi magluto og pamahaw, adto ra mi mangaon sa restaurant. Pero kung magluto siya, mokaon ra pud mi.” (We divide tasks. Sometimes she cleans, and I fetch water early in the morning. We don’t usually cook breakfast; we eat at a restaurant. But if she cooks, we also eat at home.) -Couple F, Husband

However, in terms of financial roles and resource management, one partner often handles budgeting or incomerelated decisions while the other supports through complementary tasks. Overall, their shared responsibilities help maintain order and cooperation in the relationship.

[...] Naay times na mag struggle me financially, naa puy time na dili stable. Like ang akaong work is stable and usahay husband naay times na dili stable iyahang job tungod pud sa deficiency sa company na iyahang ma trabahuan. Usahay problema gyud siya pero ma-manage ra namo gyud. Madala ragyud og smile. Parte sa amo ang sweldo, iyahang kwarta akoa pud, akong kwarta akoa ra.” (There are times we struggle financially and times things aren’t stable—my job is stable; sometimes his isn’t due to company issues. Sometimes it’s a problem but we manage—with a smile. As for salaries: his money is mine; my money is mine.) -Couple A, Wife

[...] Kanang usahay siya ray naay kwarta? Siya mo-provide. Usahay naay mga panaglalis, panag-away kay mas dako man siya ug maambag kaysa nako. Unya kanang kwinta kwintahan ka ba?” (Sometimes, she’s the only one with money. She’s the one who provides. Sometimes there are arguments and fights because she can contribute more than I can. And then there’s also that thing about keeping count of everything.) -Couple C, Husband

Table 2. Challenges in Age Gap Relationships

Themes	Subthemes
Familial and Societal Challenges	Family Disapproval Social Criticism and Stereotyping
Socioeconomic Challenges	Financial Instability and Struggles Contesting Contributions
Emotional Strains in the Relationships	Emotional Turmoil from Jealousy and Insecurity Pain And Sadness of Not Having Children

Table 2 presents the various challenges encountered by the couples, offering an overall view of how external pressures and personal circumstances shaped the progression of their relationships.

The first theme, Familial and Societal Challenges, reflects the difficulties couples face when their relationships do not conform to societal expectations, particularly regarding age differences. These challenges show that external pressures—from both family members and the broader community—can affect the couple’s emotional well-being and the way their relationship develops. This theme is further divided into two subthemes: Family Disapproval and Social Criticism and Stereotyping, both of which reveal the different ways couples experience resistance and judgment from those around them.

The subtheme Family Disapproval captures the experiences of couples who faced opposition from their immediate relatives. Many couples shared that their families questioned the motives behind their relationships or expressed concern over the age differences. For example:

[...] “Akoang mama ni ingon siya na ‘hoy Marisa kabata paman diay nana imohang pamanhunon basin binuangan raka ana ha’. Akoang nanay ragyud ang contrabida.” (“My mom said, ‘Hey Marisa, your fiancé is still so young. He might just be fooling you. My mom is really the villain of our relationship.’”) – Couple A, wife

[...] “Akong mama kay supak gyud kay taas na lagig edad. Moingun sila nganong mopatol ko nga maguwang man kayo na ako.” (“They really didn’t approve. My mother strongly opposed it because of our age difference. They said I was being fooled.”) – Couple B, husband

[...] “Suko sila, dili musugot. Gusto nila ako ra mag-atiman sa akong mga anak gikan sa akong unang kapuyo.” (“They were angry and didn’t approve. They wanted me to just take care of my children from my first partner.”)

– Couple F, wife

[...] “Dili gyud noon kay nganong wala daw ko mangita ug batan-on.” (“As for my family, they didn’t fully approve, saying I should have looked for someone younger.”) – Couple H, husband

These statements show that family disapproval can place emotional strain on couples, making them feel judged or compelled to defend their relationship.

The subtheme Social Criticism and Stereotyping reflect the judgments and remarks couples encounter from the broader community. Couples shared experiences of gossip, hurtful comments, and stereotyping, often related to the age gap or other personal circumstances. For instance:

[...] “Many times nako kadungog sa iyahang mga classmate mga bati na pulong kay usahay mag reunion. Walay problema but usahay naa gyud silay maistorya na mga makapasakit bitaw.” (“I’ve heard hurtful comments from her classmates at reunions.”) – Couple A, husband

[...] “Naa man gyuy ika sulti ang tao labi naa koy dissability aside from the age gap.” (“People will always have something to say, plus I have a disability aside from the age gap.”) – Couple A, wife

[...] “Naa gyud silay mga chismis ba. Ngano nagminyo mi, dili mi bagay kay dako kog edad, siya bata. Murag nasuya ba kay nakaminyo kog mas bata.” (“Even before we got married, there were already rumors, why did we get married, we didn’t match because I’m older and he is younger.”) – Couple B, wife

[...] “Daghan og bati nga pulong nga among madunggan. Sakit siya.” (“We hear a lot of bad words from others, it hurts, it really hurts.”) – Couple F, husband

[...] “Naa gyud mga tao nga mang-judge. Usahay makahuna-huna mi kung ipadayon pa ba ni namo o dili. Daghang anomalya ba.” (“There were really people who judged us, sometimes we even thought of whether we should continue or not.”) – Couple G, husband

[...] “Kana laging mga pulong nila nga ‘ngano nisugot man ka ana nga tigulang naman kaayo na para nimo, kadaghan man unta kag kapilian nga batan-on pa.’” (“People would always say, why did you choose someone so much older when you could have been with a younger woman.”) – Couple H, husband

These experiences demonstrate that societal criticism can weigh heavily on couples, adding another layer of challenge to their partnership.

Together, these experiences show that couples with significant age differences face pressures not only from within their families but also from the larger community. Both sources of resistance—whether through familial disapproval or societal stereotyping—can influence decisions, affect emotional well-being, and test the resilience of the relationship, requiring persistence and strength to maintain their partnership.

The second major theme, Socioeconomic Challenges, reflects the financial difficulties and tensions couples face in managing household resources and maintaining stability in their relationships. These challenges show that economic insecurity can affect not only daily life but also emotional well-being and the dynamics of decisionmaking within the partnership. This theme is further divided into two subthemes: Financial Instability and Struggles and Contesting Contribution, both of which reveal how couples navigate the pressures of limited resources and the negotiation of financial responsibilities.

The subtheme Financial Instability and Struggles captured couples’ experiences of uncertainty and inconsistency in their finances. Many couples described times when money was insufficient, leading to stress and occasional arguments. For example:

[...] “Naay times na mag struggle me financially... Usahay problema gyud siya.” (“There are times we struggle financially. Sometimes it's really a big problem.”) – Couple A, wife

[...] “Usahay maglalis kay usahay naa kwarta, usahay wala. Sauna siya driver, karon pareho namig negosyo.”

(“Sometimes we argue because sometimes we have money and sometimes we don't.”) – Couple F, wife

[...] “Usahay igo ra ang kwarta, usahay kuwang kaayo, ug lisod gyud magpadayon kay pirmi ra man gyud nga walay kasiguraduhan ang kwarta.” (“Some days we have enough, some days we barely get by, and it's stressful trying to keep up with everything when money is never steady.”) – Couple C, husband

These statements show that financial instability can create tension and uncertainty in daily life, affecting both practical decision-making and the emotional climate of the relationship. Couples must constantly adapt to fluctuating resources, which can test patience, resilience, and cooperation.

The subtheme Contesting Contribution reflects the challenges couples face in negotiating the sharing of financial responsibilities. Couples described disagreements arising when one partner's contribution was perceived as greater than the other's or when keeping track of contributions became a source of conflict. For instance:

[...] “Maglalis mi kay siya mag-ihap pila iyang gihatag, ug ako usab mag-ihap pila akong nahatag.” (“We would argue because he would count how much he had contributed and I would also keep track of how much I had given.”) – Couple B, wife

[...] “Kanang usahay siya ray naay kwarta? Siya mo provide. Usahay naay mga panaglalis, panag-away kay mas dako man siya ug maambag kaysa nako. Unya kanang kwinta-kwintahan ka ba?” (“Sometimes she is the only one with money, she is the one who provides. Sometimes there are arguments and fights because she can contribute more than I can. And then there's also that thing about keeping count of everything.”) – Couple C, husband

[...] “Usahay mag-away mi kay usahay mas daghan ang akong ihatag kaysa niya, usahay siya ang mas daghan, ug pirmi mi mag-ihap-ihap sa tanan, mao nga moabot gyud sa away.” (“Sometimes we argue because one of us would give more than the other, and we would keep tally of everything, which would lead to disagreements.”) – Couple E, husband

These accounts show that financial disagreements are not solely about the amount of money but also about perceived fairness, recognition, and balance in contributions. The act of keeping track and comparing contributions can unintentionally create tension, highlighting the emotional complexity of shared financial responsibilities.

Together, the subthemes of Financial Instability and Struggles and Contesting Contribution reveal that socioeconomic pressures can have both practical and relational consequences for couples. Financial uncertainty challenges daily living, while disputes over contributions can strain communication and emotional intimacy. These experiences underscore the need for negotiation, understanding, and cooperation in maintaining both financial stability and relational harmony within partnerships.

The third theme, Emotional Strains in the Relationship, reflects the challenges couples face in managing intense emotions, uncertainties, and personal desires that affect their bond. These experiences show that emotional difficulties—whether arising from insecurity, jealousy, or the absence of children—can impact the couple's communication, trust, and overall relationship satisfaction. This theme is further divided into two subthemes: Emotional Turmoil from Jealousy and Insecurity and Pain and Sadness of Not Having Children, both of which illustrate how personal and relational concerns contribute to emotional stress within the partnership.

The subtheme Emotional Turmoil from Jealousy and Insecurity captures the ways couples experience doubt, mistrust, and tension due to fears of infidelity or lack of attention. Couples recounted moments when jealousy and insecurity led to arguments, emotional distress, or even thoughts of separation. For example:

[...] “Naabot sa punto nga gusto na lang nako nga kung dili mi magkauyon, magbulag na lang ba. Sige man gud siya’g lingaw–lingaw, unya ako naa ra pirmi sa balay. Mao nga magduda gyud ko nga naa siya’y lain.” (“It even reached the point where I felt that if we couldn’t get along, it might be better to separate because he often went out to have fun while I stayed home. That made me doubt that he had someone else.”) – Couple B, wife

[...] “Sauna, madugayan siyag uli, ug kay mas bata siya, basin makakita siya og lain.” (“Before, he used to come home late, and because he was younger, I thought he might find someone else.”) – Couple E, wife

[...] “Ang kabalaka lang nga mangita siyag lain kay mas batan-on siya.” (“My only worry was that he might look for someone else since he’s younger.”) – Couple F, wife

[...] “Kanang panaglalis, kay ambot, magselos-selos man siya dayon kung magabihan kog uli. Mao na’y resulta sa among away.” (“Those arguments usually happen because she gets jealous right away when I come home late. That’s what starts our fights.”) – Couple H, husband

These statements show how jealousy and insecurity can provoke recurring arguments, feelings of doubt, and emotional exhaustion, which may challenge the stability and trust within the relationship.

The subtheme Pain and Sadness of Not Having Children reflects the emotional impact of childlessness on couples. Couples shared feelings of emptiness, longing, and occasional sadness when comparing their situation to others with children. For example:

[...] “Usa sab nga amo sigurong challenge no kay kaning wala miy anak, makaguol tuod usahay ba kay wala miy kaabag.” (“One of our challenges is that we don’t have a child, and sometimes it really makes us sad because we have no one to help or support us.”) – Couple B, wife

[...] “Kanang usahay ba makakita mi’s uban nga naay anak, murag maapektohan ko gamay kay wala mi matagaan ana.” (“Sometimes, when we see others with children, it affects me a little because we were never given one.”)

[...] “Makafeel ko’g kahawan sa balay, kay lahi gyud unta kung naa miy anak. Murag naa siyay kulang ba nga dili matubag.” (“I feel an emptiness in our home because it would be different if we had a child. It feels like there’s a missing piece that nothing else can fill.”)

[...] “Kana sab ngali wala miy anak, kay usahay magpangita ba, wala man mi gitagaan.” (“Maybe it’s also because we don’t have a child—sometimes we long for one, but we were never given any.”)

These utterances capture how the absence of children can create a sense of incompleteness, emotional longing, and occasional sadness that affects how couples experience their home and family life.

Together, these subthemes show the ways in which emotional challenges, whether arising from jealousy and insecurity or from childlessness, shape the dynamics of a relationship, requiring couples to navigate stress, maintain communication, and sustain trust in order to preserve their partnership.

Table 3. Coping Strategies and Mechanisms for Relationship Sustainability

Themes	Subthemes
Embracing Virtues	Spiritual Foundation Trust and Assurance Humility, Loyalty, and Forgiveness
Open And Harmonious Communication	Respect and Calm Dialogue

	Listening and Mutual Understanding Privacy or Space During Tension
Bonding And Mutual Support	Affection And Emotional Support Quality Time and Shared Activities

Table 3 presents the coping strategies and mechanisms employed by age-gap couples to sustain their relationships. The sustainability of age-gap relationships was often maintained through faith, communication, emotional bonding, and shared responsibilities that couples developed over time.

The first theme, Embracing Virtues, with its subthemes Spiritual Foundation, Trust and Assurance, and Humility, Loyalty, and Forgiveness, revealed that couples relied on spiritual beliefs and virtues to navigate relationship challenges. These virtues helped couples foster patience, resilience, and understanding.

The Spiritual Foundation showed that couples emphasized faith and prayer as primary coping mechanisms. Many couples stated that their belief in God was central to maintaining harmony and stability in their relationships. Couple A shared:

[...] “Number one gyud is prayer... mangayo kag giya ug tabang sa Ginoo.” (“First is prayer—ask God for guidance and help.”) – Couple A, wife

[...] “Pagsimba, pag-ampo, ug pagsalig sa Ginoo.” (“Going to church, praying, and trusting God.”) – Couple F, both

[...] “Permi mi musimba. Kuyog gyud mi permi.” (“We always go to church, always together.”) – Couple G, husband

[...] “I-sentro lang gyud ang ginoo.” (“Just center God in the relationship.”) – Couple J, wife

[...] “Pagsalig sa Ginoo para magpuyo og malipayon.” (“Trust in God to live happily.”) – Couple E, wife

These responses show that a shared spiritual practice is a core foundation for sustaining their relationships through guidance, patience, and peace of mind.

Trust and Assurance showed that couples viewed trust as foundational to sustaining their relationship, often seeking reassurance and providing comfort to each other. Couple B shared:

[...] “Ako siya gipasabot nga dili na siya magselos ug dili siya maghuna-huna nga nag bisyo ko.” (“I explained to her not to be jealous and not to think I had vices.”) – Couple E, husband

[...] “Dili man mawala ang iyang selos, abi niya naa koy lain. Sabton ra nako siya ug among istoryahan.” (“Her jealousy never really goes away — she thinks I have someone else, but I just understand her and we talk about it.”) – Couple H, husband

These statements show that trust, prayer, and constant reassurance helped to stabilize the relationship and reaffirm commitment.

Humility, Loyalty, and Forgiveness showed that couples emphasized the importance of humility, loyalty, and forgiveness in overcoming challenges and maintaining harmony.

[...] “Limit and forget it and face the present para walay differences, walay conflict.” (“Don’t recall past mistakes—limit and forget to avoid conflict.”) – Couple A, wife

[...] “Ang importante, magpasaylo ug magka-uyon.” (“The important thing is to forgive and reconcile.”) –

Couple D, wife

[...] “Pagsabot ug pasaylo, para dili maglalis.” (“Understanding and forgiveness, so we won’t argue.”) – Couple G, wife

[...] “Magpasaylo ug magka-uyon ra gyud para walay kalagot.” (“Forgive and reconcile to avoid anger.”) – Couple E, wife

These utterances emphasize how humility, forgiveness, and loyalty helped couples resolve conflicts and strengthen their bond.

The second theme, Open and Harmonious Communication, with its subthemes Respectful and Calm Dialogue, Listening and Mutual Understanding, and Privacy or Space During Tension, revealed how communication helped age-gap couples navigate disagreements and sustain their relationship.

Respectful and Calm Dialogue showed that maintaining respectful and calm dialogue was crucial to resolving conflicts and keeping communication open. Couple A shared:

[...] “Mura rag friend... maka-open, maka-share, maka-critique.” (“We’re like friends—we can open up, share, and give critique.”) – Couple A, husband

[...] “Pag-istoryahanay ra gyud o pagsabtanay na gyud.” (“We really make it a point to talk and understand each other.”) – Couple B, wife

[...] “Dili gyud na namo paugmaan ang problema kay mahimo na ug bungol.” (“We don’t let problems stay unresolved, because it can lead to silent treatment.”) – Couple C, both

[...] “Dili mi mosinghag; kalma nga istorya para magkasinabot.” (“We don’t shout; we talk calmly to understand each other.”) – Couple D, husband

[...] “Dapat kalma lang ta, magka-sabot.” (“We should stay calm and understand each other.”) – Couple E, wife

These statements show that respectful dialogue and the willingness to listen were critical in fostering mutual understanding and preventing misunderstandings.

Listening and Mutual Understanding showed that effective listening was highlighted as an essential strategy for conflict resolution. Couple D shared:

[...] “Ako dili rajud ko mutingog nalang pero ako mustorya ragyud ko niya unya adto ra jud ko kwarto mag istoryahanay.” (“I just don’t talk but later I talk to him in our room.”) – Couple D, wife

[...] “Ayaw ipaabot sa laing tawo kay kamo may mas nakahibaw unsa inyong problema.” (“Don’t involve others, only you both understand your problem.”) – Couple G, wife

[...] “Amo rajud na, mag istorya ra gyud mi.” (“We just talk it out.”) – Couple I, wife

Couple J said:

[...] “Pagsabot, istoryaan ra gyud namo.” (“We talk it through, understanding each other.”) – Couple J, both

These responses show that couples saw mutual understanding and active listening as essential for solving conflicts and promoting emotional safety.

Privacy or Space During Tension showed that couples valued privacy and space during moments of tension. Couple D shared:

[...] “Mulakaw rako usahay, para di na mudako ang amoa nga away.” (“Sometimes I walk out so our fight won’t escalate.”) – Couple D, husband

[...] “Mahilom lang aron dili modako ang lalis.” (“I just keep quiet so the fight won’t get bigger.”) – Couple E, wife

[...] “Wala mi magpataka og sulti, nagka-sabot ra mi.” (“We don’t speak carelessly, we understand each other.”) – Couple F, both

These responses illustrate the couple's preference for resolving conflicts privately and allowing time and space to cool down before engaging in discussions.

The third theme, Bonding and Affection, with the subtheme Quality Time and Gestures, revealed how couples kept their emotional connection strong through shared activities and frequent affectionate gestures.

Quality Time and Shared Activities showed that spending quality time together was crucial for strengthening the relationship. Couple A shared:

[...] “Dili pud ninyo kalimtan to say I love you... dapat ang I love you kung mahimo isulti siya minute to minute.” (“Don’t forget to say 'I love you'... if possible, every minute.”) – Couple A, husband

[...] “Karaoke, mangaon ug lami, para naa gihapon ang spark.” (“When we have money, we do karaoke and eat good food to keep the spark alive.”) – Couple B, wife

Couple F emphasized:

[...] “Pirmi maguban—mangaon, suroy, maligo kuyog, magmotor-motor ug picture.” (“We are always together—eating, strolling, swimming, riding motorcycles, and taking pictures.”) – Couple F, both

[...] “Kanang magsuroy-suroy nga magkuyog ra kay kami raman sad duha.” (“Just strolling around together since it’s just the two of us.”) – Couple G, wife

These utterances reflect that spending quality time and sharing meaningful activities is crucial for keeping the bond strong and maintaining intimacy.

DISCUSSION

This chapter provides a comprehensive summary of the study and a thorough discussion of its findings. It explores the implications of the results, highlighting their significance in addressing the research questions and objectives. Additionally, the chapter outlines the limitations faced during the research process and offers suggestions for future investigations. Lastly, it concludes by emphasizing the essential insights gained and reflecting on the overall contributions of the study.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Love takes many forms and grows in different ways depending on the people involved. In every relationship, there are elements that hold partners together—emotional closeness, physical attraction, and the decision to remain committed despite differences or challenges. These components reflect what Sternberg (1986) describes in his Triangular Theory of Love, which explains that love is built on intimacy, passion, and commitment. This idea is consistent with the views of Berscheid and Regan (2005) and Finkel et al. (2017), who emphasized that romantic relationships are sustained through a balance of emotional closeness, physical attraction, and long-term commitment. In the context of age-gap relationships, these elements often shift in balance; intimacy and commitment may grow stronger as partners navigate social differences and personal insecurities, while passion evolves into deeper companionship.

While there is a growing body of international research on age-gap relationships focusing on societal perceptions, power dynamics, and psychological impacts (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010; Collisson & De Leon, 2020; Niccolai & Swauger, 2021), these studies are largely rooted in Western contexts. The present study addressed this gap by providing a culturally grounded understanding of how Filipino couples—particularly those in Southern Cebu—navigate large age differences within marriage. Through a localized lens, the study contributes new insights into the emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of age-gap relationships, revealing how cultural values such as religiosity and family orientation shape relationship maintenance in the Philippine setting.

The present study reveals the complexities of age-gap relationships, particularly in how couples navigate their relationship dynamics through communication and understanding. Most participants described having an open and trust-based communication style, where calm dialogue and mutual respect play an essential role in resolving issues. They often choose to discuss problems with patience and emotional control, while some prefer temporary avoidance to cool down before addressing conflicts, allowing both partners to reflect and prevent unnecessary escalation. This communication pattern reflects emotional maturity and adaptability, which are vital in maintaining harmony within relationships. Lee and McKinnish (2017) emphasized that understanding and emotional flexibility are key elements that sustain relationship satisfaction despite the presence of disagreements or arguments. Similarly, Tembo and Mambwe (2021) noted that calm and respectful communication prevents conflicts from intensifying and strengthens the emotional connection between partners.

In terms of decision-making, most couples practiced a collaborative and balanced process that reflects Erikson's stage of Intimacy versus Isolation, which emphasizes cooperation and shared commitment in close relationships. They discussed matters together and valued each other's opinions before deciding on what benefits both sides. Some described this process as "neutral," focusing on negotiation and compromise, which supports Niccolai and Swauger's (2021) view that mutual decision-making fosters equality and respect between partners.

However, others followed a more structured pattern influenced by age and experience, where the older partner, often the wife, took the lead based on maturity and wisdom. Körner and Schütz (2021) likewise noted that older partners often hold greater structural power in decision-making, while younger partners bring adaptability and fresh perspectives that balance authority. This is consistent with Tembo and Mambwe's (2021) observation that age and experience shape relational dynamics.

The way couples manage roles and responsibilities shows how they maintain balance and cooperation in their relationship. Most described a cooperative division of labor, where the husband provides financially while the wife handles household duties and caregiving. Despite this traditional setup, couples said their roles are based on understanding and practicality rather than gender expectations. They support each other, especially during financial or personal difficulties. This aligns with Tembo and Mambwe (2021), who found that shared labor fosters equality and strengthens cooperation between partners. Likewise, Mooijman (2023) noted that when trust is established, couples can negotiate roles fairly despite differences in age or life experience.

This is anchored in Erikson's stage of Intimacy versus Isolation, which focuses on developing close, trusting, and cooperative relationships. The couple's ability to share roles and responsibilities reflects emotional maturity and a secure bond built on mutual support and understanding. By maintaining balance and teamwork despite differences in age or experience, they demonstrate the success of intimacy—choosing connection and partnership over isolation and independence.

Family acceptance greatly influences the stability of age-gap relationships. Several couples shared that they experienced disapproval and a lack of support from their families, with some parents expressing negative remarks about their child's partner's age. This reflects what Banks and Arnold (2001) found that people generally disapprove of age-gap relationships, especially when the woman is older, making such unions more prone to family opposition. However, not all families reacted negatively. Some parents expressed happiness that their child had found love despite the age difference, while others showed strong support, even describing the relationship as a blessing or "winning the lottery." These mixed reactions show that acceptance depends on how families view love and partnership, either through societal expectations or through genuine concern for their child's happiness.

This research reveals that couples in age-gap relationships continue to face widespread societal judgment and discrimination. Many experience gossip, hurtful comments, and verbal insults, often being judged as mismatched partners, especially when the woman is older. This is consistent with Lehmiller and Agnew (2006), who stated that individuals in age-gap relationships often perceive their partnerships as targets of social bias from both their peers and the wider community. Similarly, Cowan (1984) found that people tend to view age-gap relationships as less likely to succeed than those with no age difference, with unions involving older women perceived as even more likely to fail. This shows that social norms continue to favor relationships that follow traditional age expectations. Likewise, Voo (2007) noted that women in such relationships are frequently labeled as “cougars,” a stereotype that dismisses emotional connection and portrays them as pursuing younger men for physical reasons.

These findings are anchored in the Social Exchange Theory proposed by Homans (1958), which explains that individuals evaluate their relationships by weighing perceived rewards against potential costs. In the case of age-gap relationships, social disapproval, gossip, and discrimination act as social costs that test the couple’s stability and emotional strength. Even if society tends to question or reject these relationships, couples still choose to remain together because the emotional rewards they gain such as love, trust, and companionship provide a deeper sense of fulfillment and stability. Many of them view their relationship as a meaningful source of emotional security that outweighs the pain of external judgment. From this perspective, staying in the relationship becomes a conscious decision to prioritize personal happiness over social acceptance. This also reflects the couples’ ability to redefine what “value” means in their relationship, emphasizing emotional satisfaction rather than public approval.

Emotional challenges in age-gap relationships often arise from jealousy, insecurity, and the impact of life stage differences. Many older female partners shared that they feel anxious when their younger husbands spend time outside or engage in social activities with friends. These situations trigger fear of being replaced or compared to younger women, leading to moments of self-doubt and emotional strain. The couples often manage these feelings through reassurance, open communication, and patience, but the underlying insecurity remains tied to the visible gap in age and lifestyle. According to Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages Theory, this reflects the tension between Intimacy versus Isolation and Generativity versus Stagnation. The older partner, often in the generativity stage, prioritizes stability, commitment, and emotional depth, while the younger partner, still navigating intimacy, seeks connection but also independence and exploration. The intersection of these stages can create conflict, as each person’s needs and developmental focus differ, influencing how they handle trust, affection, and autonomy in the relationship.

Another emotional difficulty expressed by some couples is their inability to have children due to the wife’s age. This experience adds another layer of sadness and frustration, particularly for younger husbands who may still long for parenthood. The absence of children can sometimes lead to feelings of incompleteness or inadequacy, especially for the older partner who may blame herself for the limitation. This emotional struggle also connects strongly to Erikson’s stage of Generativity versus Stagnation, where individuals seek to nurture and guide the next generation as a way of finding meaning and purpose. When this opportunity is lost, it can lead to a sense of stagnation or emotional emptiness, which couples must overcome through acceptance, mutual reassurance, and shared purpose. By focusing on emotional fulfillment, companionship, and the nurturing of each other rather than offspring, many partners find alternative forms of generativity—expressing care, growth, and legacy within the relationship itself.

Financial concerns emerge as one of the major challenges faced by partners in age-gap relationships. Many described having unstable jobs that lead to financial stress and frequent arguments about who contributes more, sometimes even keeping track of each other’s financial input. Others shared that one partner carries both income and household responsibilities, creating feelings of exhaustion and inequality. These experiences reflect the balance of costs and rewards explained by Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958), where financial strain and unequal effort represent relational costs that can affect satisfaction and stability. Rodriguez et al. (2023) noted that dependence on one partner’s income may lead to power imbalances, shaping who makes decisions and how authority is exercised in the relationship. Such conditions often test the couple’s emotional resilience and their ability to maintain harmony amid economic challenges.

Despite these financial difficulties, many couples find ways to maintain stability through cooperation and role complementarity. Several participants shared that one partner takes responsibility for providing financially, while the other focuses on maintaining emotional balance and managing household duties. This arrangement reflects interdependence rather than inequality, as both contribute in different but equally valuable ways. Neuro Launch (2024), Lowenthal and Haven (1968), and Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010) described similar dynamics, where older partners often provide wisdom, guidance, and stability, while younger partners bring energy, adaptability, and optimism. Sassler (2010) further explained that this complementarity fosters personal growth and strengthens the relationship.

Coping mechanisms help explain how couples in age-gap relationships sustain their connection despite emotional challenges, societal judgment, and financial struggles. Previous studies, such as that of Tembo and Mambwe (2021), have shown that Western couples often rely on emotional compatibility, understanding, and mutual respect to maintain long-term satisfaction. They cope with relationship strains through open communication, emotional reassurance, and creating “love narratives” that strengthen their bond. Similarly, Filipino couples in this study practice these same strategies—resolving disagreements through calm dialogue, showing affection to ease tension, and treating their relationship like a friendship built on listening, laughter, and forgiveness. These behaviors reflect emotional maturity and highlight that patience, respect, and understanding are universal foundations of healthy relationships across cultures.

When dealing with societal criticism, couples revealed that they often become each other’s safe space. Hurtful comments, gossip, and judgment are common, especially in relationships where the woman is older. However, instead of reacting defensively, most couples choose to focus inward—talking privately and refusing to let public opinion dictate their happiness. They engage in shared routines, such as eating together, attending church, or spending leisure time outdoors, which help them feel grounded in each other’s company. These small, consistent acts of togetherness align with what Rusu, Bodenmann, and Kayser (2018) described as positive dyadic coping, where empathy and mutual support transform external stress into an opportunity for deeper emotional connection. By responding to social pressure with unity rather than division, these couples strengthen not only their bond but also their resilience against external negativity.

Financial challenges further test their patience and cooperation. Some participants mentioned struggling with unstable jobs and uneven workloads, leading to arguments about who contributes more. Yet, instead of allowing financial strain to weaken their relationship, couples learn to adapt. They divide responsibilities in ways that make sense—one may focus on earning while the other manages the household, ensuring emotional balance and daily stability.

These actions illustrate what Barnes (2012) called adaptability, a vital component of marital resilience, and support Groot and Van den Brink’s (2002) finding that shared values and complementary roles increase satisfaction in age-gap relationships. The couples’ willingness to adjust their roles, prioritize understanding, and find joy in simple routines demonstrates that love’s strength is not measured by wealth but by teamwork and shared perseverance.

These findings are best understood through Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love (1986), which explains that enduring love consists of three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. The couples’ faith-based communication, honesty, and emotional openness reflect intimacy, as they build trust and closeness through shared vulnerability. Their affectionate gestures, companionship, and shared experiences embody passion—one that matures from mere attraction into deep emotional connection. Finally, their decision to remain steadfast despite social disapproval and financial strain reflects commitment, the choice to stay and nurture the relationship regardless of circumstance. Together, these elements illustrate how love in age-gap relationships evolves beyond societal expectations. It becomes a form of resilience—anchored in faith, strengthened by communication, and sustained by mutual devotion.

Beyond Sternberg’s framework, the couple’s behaviors are anchored in Attachment Theory, which helps explain how emotional stability and reassurance sustain their relationships despite conflict and external stress. Attachment Theory posits that securely attached individuals tend to resolve disagreements calmly, offer consistent emotional support, and remain responsive to their partner’s needs—patterns that were evident in many

of the couple's accounts. Several participants described comforting one another through hugs, gentle touch, and quiet reassurance during moments of misunderstanding, fostering a sense of safety and closeness. Others highlighted the importance of spending quality time together, maintaining shared routines, and communicating openly to prevent small issues from escalating. These practices reflect the core principles of secure attachment, illustrating how emotional regulation, attentiveness, and warmth enable couples to preserve harmony and remain connected even when tensions arise.

A noteworthy finding that distinctly characterizes Filipino couples in this study is their strong reliance on spirituality as a central coping anchor. Many participants described turning to prayer, seeking guidance from God, and grounding their relationship in faith when confronted with criticism or relational strain. For them, love was understood not merely as a private bond between two individuals but as a commitment entrusted to a higher power. This orientation reflects the broader Filipino cultural context, where religiosity is deeply embedded in everyday life and moral decision-making. Faith functioned not only as emotional comfort but also as a stabilizing framework that reinforced patience, forgiveness, and perseverance amid the unique pressures associated with age-gap relationships.

Beyond religiosity, the findings also revealed that couples approached their relationships through a mindset of *pakikipagkapwa*—a relational orientation rooted in the indigenous concept of *kapwa* articulated in *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Enriquez, 1992). Within this framework, the self is understood as fundamentally interconnected with others rather than autonomous and individualistic. Participants demonstrated this shared identity through mutual sacrifice, collective problem-solving, and a strong sense of teamwork. Their commitment extended beyond personal satisfaction and was instead anchored in shared responsibility, relational harmony, and accountability to family and community. This supports Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino's (2000) assertion that Filipino behavior is best understood through indigenous constructs that emphasize relational embeddedness and social connectedness.

The influence of culturally embedded values such as *hiya* (social propriety) and *utang na loob* (reciprocal obligation) further shaped how couples navigated societal scrutiny. Rather than openly confronting critics, many participants responded with restraint, patience, and a desire to maintain harmony—reflecting the importance of preserving social relationships while protecting their partnership. These findings suggest that coping among Filipino age-gap couples is not solely an interpersonal process but also a culturally mediated one, shaped by collective norms, moral expectations, and spiritual belief.

Ultimately, this study enriches the growing body of research on age-gap relationships by offering a distinctly Filipino perspective that has been largely absent from existing literature. While international studies commonly identify understanding, respect, and affection as universal protective factors, the present findings demonstrate that Filipino couples extend these foundations through faith, prayer, and relational collectivism. The integration of religiosity and *pakikipagkapwa* as coping mechanisms reflects how love in the Philippine context is deeply intertwined with spiritual belief, family bonds, and shared moral values. By situating age-gap relationships within indigenous Filipino social frameworks, this study broadens global understanding of how relational sustainability is shaped not only by individual compatibility but also by culturally grounded systems of meaning and support.

Implications

The study broadens the application of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Attachment Theory within the Filipino cultural context by demonstrating that the sustainability of age-gap relationships depends more on emotional maturity, communication, shared values, and secure attachment than on age similarity. The findings further show that these relational processes are shaped by indigenous Filipino constructs such as *kapwa*, *hiya*, *utang na loob*, and religiosity, highlighting the importance of integrating *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* into mainstream relationship scholarship. Practically, the results inform culturally responsive counseling and educational interventions that recognize the influence of family systems, spirituality, and community norms on relationship well-being, while future research may expand to more diverse populations and methodological approaches to further examine agegap relationships within evolving Filipino social contexts.

CONCLUSION

Overall, our results show that the sustainability of age-gap relationships depends not on the absence of conflict, but on the presence of coping systems built on love, faith, patience, teamwork, and mutual respect. What makes our findings especially meaningful is the distinctly Filipino approach to relationship sustainability. Compared to Western couples, Filipino age-gap couples rely more heavily on prayer, religiosity, and family-centered values. These culturally rooted coping mechanisms strengthen emotional resilience and foster long-term commitment in ways that are not commonly emphasized in Western literature. Consistent with Sikolohiyang Pilipino, particularly the concept of *kapwa*, partners exhibit a relational orientation grounded in shared identity, social harmony, and responsibility to family and community, while values such as *hiya* and *utang na loob* inform how they respond to societal scrutiny.

This study highlights the importance of cultural context in understanding relationship dynamics and demonstrates how Filipino couples' faith and close-knit family ties play a central role in their ability to overcome challenges and sustain their relationships.

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