



Perceived Opportunities and Challenges Experienced in Inter-Generational Marriages: Insights from Young Men in Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Intergenerational marriages, resulting from age differences between spouses are a global cultural phenomenon that has generated fervent research interest among researchers from multiple disciplines. Women-older marriages however remain understudied unlike the more common same-age or men-older unions. This study sought to qualitatively explore the perceived opportunities and challenges by young men in women-older marriages from an Afrocentric perspective. The research adopted a phenomenological research design and a total of five (5) young men in women-older marriages, ranging from 11 – 17 years of age disparity, were selected for in-depth interviews through snowball sampling method. Seven (7) significant others (friends, relatives or neighbours) were also conveniently and purposively selected to solicit their views. Qualitative data was thematically analysed and the findings revealed that young men perceived such marriages as beneficial for secure lifestyles and general marital satisfaction with older-women viewed as mature and emotionally intelligent partners. Challenges faced included the negative societal attitudes, disapproval and ridicule which often lead to poor mental health outcomes. This study recommends that communities be engaged and sensitised to change attitudes towards intergenerational marriages, and that helping professionals do community engagements where they offer psycho-education to build resilience and general coping skills for young men in women-older marriages.

Keywords: Intergenerational marriages, Assortative mating, Marriage squeeze, Double-standard of aging

1. Introduction

The age structure taking place at diverse rates across population cohorts has nurtured a substantial interest in light of implications for intergenerational associations. According to White (2013: 216) as cited in Slagsvold and Hansen (2021) from a communal viewpoint, “today’s social problems are the problems of generations”. Viewing the world in a generational realm enables a candid observer to capture both social transformations and understand the differences (Collins, 2019). In the context of age composition shift, the classification of generations generates a lens that crystallises possible variances and foundations of conflict in significant societal spheres such as affluence, housing, employment, marriage, and debt (Mobasher, 2021). In terms of perception, age composition has brought ‘intergenerational marriages’ onto international agendas (Burholt et al., 2020). Ideally, this generational conversation ensues at the nodes of population cohorts, structural variations in couples, and concerns about the failing of intergenerational marriage solidarity and support



(Nethercote, 2019). The increasing interest in intergenerational marriages coincides with the transition of young men into marriage and the challenges of managing tender and open relationships with aging spouses (Fingerman et al., 2020).

Be that as it may, society disapproves at pairs with huge age differences. Upon reflection, however, these affairs are not inevitably predestined to failure (Choi et al., 2020). In light of the above, results of a famous survey administered to 2,000 adults in America demonstrated that four years was the ideal age gap, but half of the respondents claimed that no ideal gap exists (Hener & Wilson, 2018). That goes without saying, there's much more to couples compared to their birthdays. A number of intergenerational couples keep on enjoying marital bliss long after their similarly-aged comparison others have called it quits (Minokadeh, 2018). The intriguing question is, what are the mysteries that inform successful May-December romances? Firstly, maturity comes to the fore. Ordinarily, young men in intergenerational marriages opine that they relish a noteworthy benefit over couples with minor age gaps, for instance, the direction of a seasoned spouse, who has apparently borne many of life's adversities (McKenzie, 2021). Of note, maturity often comes with financial stability, even though a lot of individuals roll their eyes at this, it remains a valid fact (Freeze, 2021). In a sense, financial issues exacerbate an increase in divorces among young couples.

Secondly, life stages and personal priorities initiate intergenerational ties. Mates might occupy dispersed generations, but still, be mutually on the same page of the lifecycle (Cherlin, 2020). This becomes the basis for the two to relate. In a classic example of a 49-year-old and 24-year-old without kids, outgoing, and steady professionals may do better than two 24-year-olds with totally divergent priorities. Thirdly, effective communication is a fundamental institution in every association. In this view, whereas a substantial age gap may be the reason for challenges, it cannot in any way doom partners who wrestle to relate (Bhan et al., 2019). Some couples of almost equal age scuffle to communicate in spite of holding an amazing deal in common (Manning, 2020). For the reason that May-December partners are drawn from unique mindsets, they might essentially recognize their variances and do the needful to actuate robust communication strategies (Ritter & Nowakowski, 2020). Therefore, couples of all ages should establish effective strategies that enhance the attainment of mutual understanding.

Lastly, family acceptance is the base of a marital superstructure. Occasionally, inversely aged couples get along excellently—till their family members or significant others butt in (Walter, 2021). Ideally, family condemnation may wreak havoc on even the most solid relationships (McGoldrick & Hardy, 2019). Love birds can make sarcastic remarks about age variances well after tying the knot. Spouses privileged to relish communal acceptance, or command respect irrespective, have the best probabilities of success, regardless of their age. To some, there is no precedence to establishing a flawless age disparity (Balberg & Weiss, 2021). On one more practical level, age gaps generate unexpected challenges, yet they don't extinguish all likelihood of a blissful, lasting marriage.

A tripartite theoretical framework can be used to describe age discrepancies between couples. In this vein, the chiefly used notion is *homogamy* or *assortative mating*, which is grounded on the view that individuals, inclined



through cultural conditioning, turn to marry in comparison to others in their age range (Tian& Davis, 2019). One hypothesis suggests that a larger age gap is related to complex marital instability. Another dominant concept is *marriage squeeze*, which explains that the supply and demand of companions compel the individuals to widen or reduce the age range of acceptable partners (Mishra& Kaur, 2021). The third and uncommon notion is the *double standard of aging*, which presumes that males are usually less castigated for aging than females (Chen& Tong, 2021). This proposition is buttressed by a large rate of recurrence of partnerships of older men with younger women and much more variability in men's marriage age than women's (Villar et al., 2019).

The age variance between partners in marriage has persisted fairly constant for many decades in a number of countries, a fact suggested by Wang and Xia (2020) as a practically historical pattern. However, in exceptional cases, healthier or more active potential suitors are chosen by younger men or women (Wu, 2022). Those people would have lived more than whomever they married owing to physical strength and health which typically coincides with increased long life (Thomas& Dommermuth, 2020). One more thinkable outcome of the selection is that physiological desires are better taken care of in later life for individuals married to younger partners (Carr& Utz, 2020). Another conceivable postulation points to spousal interaction. It is assumed that there could be some psychological, sociological, or physiological benefits to a bond with a younger mate (Zhang et al., 2018). Moreover, it could be suggested that intimate participation with a younger partner invigorates anybody's probability of longer life (Ševčíková& Sedláková, 2020). This submission explicitly crystallizes psychological elements of mortality, for instance, societal and interpersonal attraction, contentment, self-concept, and social grade. To address justice to the demands of the phenomenon in question, the researchers endeavoured to lay bare the characteristics of intergenerational marriages from an Afrocentric perspective. More effort was directed towards young men who were married to older spouses for various individual reasons.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

- To examine perceived opportunities associated with inter-generational marriages.
- To establish challenges of inter-generational marriages.
- To establish coping strategies utilized by young men to manage challenges experienced in inter-generational marriages.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm which, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2011) is a paradigm in which individuals endeavour to have an understanding of the world around them through developing subjective meanings of their experiences or meanings towards specific things, events or objects. The philosophy was chosen as it helped in bringing out the views of the target group, and get an understanding of the experiences they encountered in intergenerational marriages. This is in line with Creswell (2018) who reasons that, interpretivism allows the researcher to understand the research participants' world views as they view it within their natural setting.



2.2 Research Approach

The researchers utilised qualitative approach as it helps in capturing the subjective, often intangible nature of human existence. This approach proved to be suitable for the study as it helped in bringing out the subjective nature of the research area under review, which is intergenerational marriage. This approach is supported by Krauss (2005) who ascertain that, qualitative research is a research approach adopted by researchers whose conviction is that the best way to understand any phenomenon is to view it within its context. Therefore, since this study aimed to understand a very sensitive and often hidden phenomenon of intergenerational marriages between old women and young men thus the adoption of the qualitative approach proved to be very useful in exploring the intricate issues relate to this phenomenon.

2.3 Research Design

The study utilised a qualitative phenomenological case study in trying to understand the phenomenon of intergenerational marriages. The researchers opted for this design as it gave them the opportunity to better understand such an intricate social phenomenon. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2010), state that one of the merits of the case study approach is that it allows the researcher to gain an understanding of social phenomena from participants' perspectives in their natural settings. Therefore, in this context, intergenerational marriages were understood from the perspectives of the young men who were in such type of marital union during the conduct of the study. Views were also sought from their significant others.

2.4 Population

The target population were all young men fifteen years younger than their spouses and beyond, found in intergenerational marriages and their significant others in Masvingo urban.

2.5 Sample and sampling procedure

A sample is a representative section of the target population from which data are obtained. In this study, a sample of five young men who were in intergenerational marriages were drawn from Mucheke High density suburb in Masvingo. Snowballing sampling method was utilised as this group of people is not easy to reach. The method was used in such a way that either after getting a participant, the researcher was then referred to the next one in a similar situation or by being directed by other people who knew individuals who were in such marriages even though the informants were not in such unions themselves. In addition, seven significant others who included the young men's close relatives, friends or neighbours also formed another group of the sample. This group was selected using purposive sampling which was based on the researchers' judgments that they could provide key information to the study. Creswell (2013), asserts that determining an adequate sample size in qualitative research is ultimately a matter of using one's own judgment and experience in evaluating the quality of the information collected against the use to which it is to be put. The sample size of this study was also determined by data saturation.

2.6 Data collection procedure



The researchers got permission to access the participants from the community gatekeepers. After that, informed consent was sought through the use of informed consent forms. In depth interviews were utilised in soliciting data. The interviews ran for approximately an hour or less depending with the eloquence of the participants. The interviews were conducted either in English or Shona depending with the participant’s preference. They were also audio-recorded after getting approval from the participants. In-depth interviewing is identified as a qualitative study technique that requires administration of detailed individual interviews on a small number of respondents to gain insights on a specific notion (Mataruse, 2021). In relation to this, Johnson and Christensen (2014) highlights that an interview provide in-depth information about the participant’s ways of thinking. The advantage of interviews is that they give room to probe hence are flexible. They also allow the participants to open up on issues related to the research issue of interest. After data collection, the interview transcripts were transcribed within 48hours.

2.7 Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. According to Creswell (2013), thematic analysis uncovers embedded information at the same time unmasking the views of the participants. The six steps of thematic analysis as outlined by Attride-Stirling (2001), were followed. One of the advantages of thematic analysis is its theoretical independence that can either be inductive or theory-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Despite this flexible nature of thematic analysis, the researchers followed systematic and rigorous guidelines to gain meaningful and useful results.

3. Results Presentation

3.1 Summary of Participant Profiles

The table below shows the distribution of participants:

- the duration of their marriages.
- age differences between participant and his spouse inserted.

Pseudonym	Age difference between participant and his partner	Duration of marriage (years)	Significant others and relationship
Tinodaishe	14	6	Panashe (Father), Anesu (Mother).
AnorId	11	4	Eney (Brother).
Wallace	17	7	Grace (Sister).
Tom	10	12	Justin (Uncle).
Austin	14	5	Joyce (Aunty), Anita (Sister).

Table 1: Distribution of participants

The findings show that, young men face a lot of challenges which are somehow equivalent to the opportunities and benefits of intermarriages. The above highlighted participants expressed different challenges and opportunities they face in intermarriages.



Perceived opportunities associated with inter-generational marriages.

A belief that, most older women are well established financially gives most young man confidence to step into a marriage with a woman likely more than ten years older than him. Participant's responses brought out that, men in inter-generational marriages experience financial pluses and extra benefits. One of the participants Tom remarks:

The obvious benefit is financial stability in my opinion. Older ladies who usually get married to younger men are wealthy after being widowed or divorced from.

When a marriage ends in the case of death of a spouse, the surviving spouse has the right to half of the wealthy the two had. The participants stated inheritance of the wealth as one of the advantages of intergenerational marriage. Findings from participants show that, one can inherit the wealthy of the spouse when she dies. Wallace alluded that:

You gain financially if the older spouse has wealth. You may have time to enjoy life as the older spouse will be now mature and reasonable. There are opportunities to inherit wealth if the older spouse dies.

Concerning the opportunities and challenges faced in intermarriage, one other participant believes benefits exceeds challenges. Tom alluded that:

When you are loved, with less conflicts and you are given financial support for whatever you want to do, then what else do you want in a marriage.

The results roved that, most young men married to older woman live a happy life as most of their roles as husband and the different duties they need to play are well catered for by the wife. Arnold confirmed that:

We do enjoy the marriage because we have escaped from the traditional gender role of being a breadwinner. The wife satisfies all my material needs, which brings some happiness.

Challenges of inter-generational marriages.

Although young men experience financial gains, happiness is not their everyday thing due to societal expectations and the transmission of everyday cultural norms and values. Some of the challenges they experience end up affecting their mental health. Austin alluded that:

Yes, we enjoy some kind happiness to a certain extent, but however we also experience a lot of embarrassment from friends, family and society in general which in some way affects our life satisfaction and overall mental health.

The findings conformed that, the relatives and family members of the married couple exacerbates some of the challenges and problems they experience due to intergenerational marriage. One of the participants Tinodaishe stated that:



Some young men in such marriages, won't open up but most of us we suffer ridicule from society and close family who criticise marrying an older wife.

Wallace, one of the participants confirmed the significant impact that culture has towards intergenerational marriage. In his statement he stated that:

In some cases, the other partner's children or relative may not approve of the relationship which poses as a challenge. Disapproval may also come from neighbours

Results showed that, most of the men in intergenerational marriages are labelled as gold diggers in the societies they live and even from the close relatives of their spouse. Tom alluded that:

It's a bit tense to enjoy your relationship since the society and the relatives of my wife view me as a 'gold-digger.' The relatives end up treating me like wise.

Individual perceptions on intergenerational marriages.

Evidence obtained from the significant others closely, related to the married young men proved the significant impact of culture and how the society influences our way of life. Results indicate that, most of the young men marry older women as a result of some push factors which is against their free will. Wallace stated that:

Intergenerational marriages are different from same age marriages in that they are usually marriages of convenience rather than true love marriages. The younger men marry due to some push-factor which is not necessarily true love.

Intergenerational marriages have been discovered to be a great yield to marital satisfaction. Tinodaishe alluded that:

Intergenerational marriages exhibit less marital dissatisfaction than same-age marriages because the older spouse brings maturity in the relationship

One of the participants Panashe, believed that marriage is not only for two but also for the whole family. The participant had this to say:

One should just marry within their age because when you marry you marry for the family not for yourself.

Most of the participants believed that same age marriages are far much better than intergenerational marriage on the bases alluded below:

Intergenerational marriages are usually built on unequal ground than same-age marriages hence there is bound to be more conflicts in such unions than in the latter



Results showed that, the economic climate and social challenges experienced in the external world are facilitating intergenerational marriages.

Some men marry older women due to their circumstances, for example unemployment or lack of access to a stable income. The marriages are therefore different from same-age marriages which are motivated by genuine love.

Coping strategies utilized by young men to manage challenges experienced in inter-generational marriages.

Young men in intergenerational marriages experience a lot of challenges, albeit the challenges experienced in their marriages, the young men are enjoying their marriages. They have managed to come up with different strategies to overcome some of the challenges they face. One of the strategies they use is selective attention. They believe in selecting and focusing on particular information which they believe is of greater use for further processing while simultaneously suppressing irrelevant or distracting information. One of the participants Tom, stated that:

I don't listen to everything the society say about our marriage. I focus on what is important and what keeps our relationship going.

From the participant's responses, positivity was discovered as one of the key strategies in overcoming challenges associated with their marriage. They believed in being positive all the time and not taking other people's opinions too personal. Wallace one of the participants alluded that:

People will never stop talking about our marriage, like almost every day I receive different information and insults from different people within my community, some who are close friends and relatives but I always choose to be positive in my social perception.

Consulting the Church Counsellor was discovered as another strategy in mitigating challenges they face in intergenerational marriages. One of the participants Tinodaishe was so confident in his statement:

'If I engage in some misunderstanding with my wife maybe as a result of financial issues like wat once happened sometime back then, we visited the church Counsellor of our denomination, from the visit to our Pastor and also Counsellor, it yielded a positive result from there'.

Mental relaxation strategies such as taking a walk alone were identified as other strategies employed by young men in mitigating challenges associated with intermarriages.

Sometimes when I argue with my wife, I always try not exacerbate an existing problem by taking a walk, and taking a walk have been an effective way of calming myself down and preventing unnecessary arguments with my wife.



4. Discussion of Findings

Intergenerational marriages, and/or age differences between spouses is a global phenomenon that has been observed in various cultural groups. Although the conventional trend has been that of men being older than their spouses or be of same-age, findings of this study revealed that women-older unions are not uncommon, but are also quite prevalent. Notwithstanding the motivations behind such marriages, women-older unions are unique and present a myriad of both opportunities and challenges particularly for younger men in the African context. As presented in the preceding sections, insights of young men in Masvingo urban informed the current study.

Age differences between spouses in general, but women-older marriages in particular, undoubtedly have psychosocial consequences in multiple domains. One of the recurring opportunities highlighted by young men in this study was that of financial and/or economic stability. Consistent with Bianchi, Seltzer, Hotz, and McGarry's (2006) idea that 'intergenerational relationships are based on self-interested behaviour with transfers made with the expectation of some form of reciprocity or exchange', the opportunity for improving their generally poor socio-economic status and wellbeing by the young men perhaps best explains their motivation. The findings of this study echo those by McKenzie (2021) as well as Freeze (2021) who established those young men relish a noteworthy benefit of a seasoned spouse, who has apparently borne many of life's adversities, and whose maturity often comes with financial stability. There is thus a shared general perception of stability and a secure lifestyle in marrying an older woman among younger men.

Apart from the perceived financial benefits, the current study also found that young men relish the opportunity to escape the often demanding African traditional or gender role of being a 'breadwinner'. Most participants pointed out that their older wife not only satisfies their material needs, but has no expectation of any reciprocal financial provision typical of same-age or husband-older marriages. Smith (2020), similarly noted that marrying an older woman is beneficial in that she does not try to switch up (or down) the relationship status quo randomly because they've decided that they need more from you, and not what you can provide materially. Smith elaborates that marrying an older wife means that you will know where you stand, where the boundaries are and where your relationship is heading.

The present study also established that one of the merits of intergenerational marriages is that 'an older woman is considered wiser and emotionally intelligent' which brings greater marital happiness and satisfaction. Nascimento (2021) observed that older women tend to be more in control of their emotions than younger women. Similar observations were made by Smith (2020) who points out that 'marrying an older woman can bring many benefits, not least because old women tend to be more self-aware, confident, clearer about what they want and more emotionally stable'. The current study established that older-women are perceived as more loving, tolerant, respectful and caring unlike younger women who are viewed as typically argumentative and contentious even over trivial issues and easily throw tantrums. The emotional intelligence of older women would thus most likely reduce the incidence of marital conflict and enhances longevity of marriage.



However, having an older spouse is generally considered detrimental, and presents a plethora of challenges particularly for younger men (Nascimento, 2021). Marrying an older woman within the African context is generally perceived negatively and requires young men to have some 'thick skin' to withstand societal negativity. Although intergenerational marriages provide young men some opportunities for marital satisfaction, real happiness and joy are not an everyday experience. One of the major challenges highlighted was that young men experience a lot of embarrassment from ridicule by peers, family and society in general which affects their mental health and overall quality of life. This is consistent with findings by Nascimento (2019) who noted that one major consequence of age disparity between spouses, especially having an older partner is positively associated with symptoms of depression among men.

Although mate selection and marriage are a function of individual preferences in Western societies which value individualism and freedom, it is a communal undertaking in African societies which value collectivism. Marrying an older woman is generally disapproved in the collective African societies where extended family members have a say in who you marry. Those who engage in intergenerational marriages thus run the risk of societal castigation which affects their commitment and longevity of such a union. Nascimento (2021) elaborated that age dissimilarity among spouses affects important aspects of marriage such as commitment to the relationship, which leads to infidelity and heightens the risks of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. It would seem that young men who marry older women do so solely for the financial benefit but still go on to engage in extra-marital relationships with the conventionally preferred younger women.

The other challenge established by the current study is that immediate family members and significant others generally disapprove intergenerational marriages and dismiss those who enter such marriages as 'gold diggers'. Significant others perceive such unions as marriages of convenience not anchored on real love, as such they withhold the necessary approval and support. The apparent challenge from the onset would be that such marriages are weak and do not last long enough as they lack the necessary collective support. Nascimento (2021) similarly observed that age-different couples are less resilient to problems in the relationship in comparison to same-age couples. The generation gap seemingly erodes the common ground that ideally provides the strong foundation for resilience.

5. Conclusions

Intergenerational marriages or the age disparity between spouses is a global cultural phenomenon that has generated interest amongst researchers. Although men-older marriages are more conventional within the African context, women-older unions are not uncommon and appear to be occurring with even greater frequency. This paper interrogated the perceived opportunities and challenges experienced in intergenerational marriages by tapping into the insights of younger men in such unions, as well as the views of their significant others. Notable opportunities included the prospects for a stable and secure lifestyle; as well as enhanced marital satisfaction due to perceptions of older-women as mature, tolerant, wiser, and emotionally intelligent partners. However, some serious challenges also derive from these huge age



differences notably the general negative societal attitudes, community disapproval and ridicule which often culminates in embarrassment and poor mental health among the younger men.

6. Recommendations

In light of some of the highlighted benefits of women-older marriages, this study recommends that communities be sensitised to change attitudes towards women-older marriages. It is imperative that the younger generation be enlightened on marital issues, from partner selection to marital adjustment.

In light of the complexity of intergenerational unions, it is also recommended that society at large should preserve the social conventions of marriage that discourage younger-husband unions. This would in a way guarantee their longevity.

The study adopted the qualitative research approach which gave in-depth information on the perceived opportunities and challenges experienced in inter-generational marriages. It is recommended that further research be conducted utilising the quantitative approach so as to yield valid and reliable information on intergenerational unions.

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