

Introduction

Age-gap relationships (AGRs) tend to be evaluated with more prejudice than age-matched relationships and be associated with unfavorable terms such as “cougar” or “cradle-robber” (Collinson & Ponce de Leon, 2018; Lehmilller & Agnew, 2011).

Evolutionary theory could explain the negativity associated with older women in AGRs. Specifically, in AGRs younger men do not adhere to their evolutionary expectations of selecting younger and more fertile mates, and older women do not prioritize older men with resources (Buss, 1995).

Another possible explanation for such negative evaluations may relate to societal attitudes associated with the sexual double standard (SDS). The SDS is a phenomenon that allows men sexual agency, while socially punishing women for similar sexual behaviors (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Marks & Fraley, 2005). Therefore, older women’s sexuality in AGRs may appear to violate societal norms and thus result in unfavorable perceptions of the women.

In addition, because of sparse research regarding AGRs, we were also interested in examining how relationship length (i.e., a short-term or long-term relationship) could impact perceptions of AGRs.

Overview and Hypotheses

This study employed a 2 (relationship length: dating a month or dating a year) X 2 (gender of the older person: woman older/man younger or man older/woman younger) design.

Given the possible impact of endorsing the SDS can have on perceptions of sexual behavior, we included participants’ endorsement of the SDS as an interest variable in our study.

The following hypotheses and research questions were developed:

- AGRs with an older woman will lead to less favorable perceptions of the couple (H1a) and the woman (H1b) compared to AGRs with an older man, while AGRs with an older man will lead to more favorable perceptions of the man (H1c).
- Higher endorsement of the SDS will lead to less favorable perceptions of the couple (H2a) and the woman (H2b) and more favorable perceptions of the man (H2c).
- How will relationship length impact perceptions of the couple (RQ1a), the woman (RQ1b) and the man (RQ1c)?
- How will endorsement of the SDS interact with relationship length to impact perceptions of the couple (RQ2a), the woman (RQ2b) and the man (RQ2c)?

Pilot Study

Thirty-six MTurk participants were asked to indicate the maximum age an older partner could be when dating a 26-year-old before such a relationship became inappropriate. The median response was 40.00 ($M = 41.88, SD = 10.51$). Thus, the chosen age for the older partner was determined to be 42.

Vignettes

The following cover story and instructions were presented to the participants:

Last year, CupidMeets hosted a mixer for single adults/Last month, CupidMeets hosted an online mixer for single adults. CupidMeets is a start-up dating service that focuses on in-person dating and is attempting to advertise itself as more successful than online dating services such as Tinder. We have gathered information on participants after this event in an attempt to predict and showcase future “success stories” in advertisements.

Instructions: You will be presented with a randomly selected couple bio. Please read the bio and answer the following questions. Your responses will be used to assist the marketing research team.

Condition: Long-term Relationship/ Older Woman, Younger Man

Couple’s Names: Lisa and Derek

Ages: 42 and 26

Location: Raleigh, North Carolina

Relationship Bio:

Lisa (age 42) and Derek (age 26) have been dating for almost a year. Lisa has two Golden Retrievers and enjoys volunteering at the local animal shelter. Derek likes to run and usually participates in the annual community half-marathon. As a couple, they both enjoy watching movies and traveling every chance they get. In fact, they hope to celebrate their 1-year anniversary by traveling to Chimney Rock, a beautiful hiking location. They have discussed moving in with each other in the future but want to wait until the timing is right.

Condition: Short-Term Relationship/ Older Man, Younger Woman

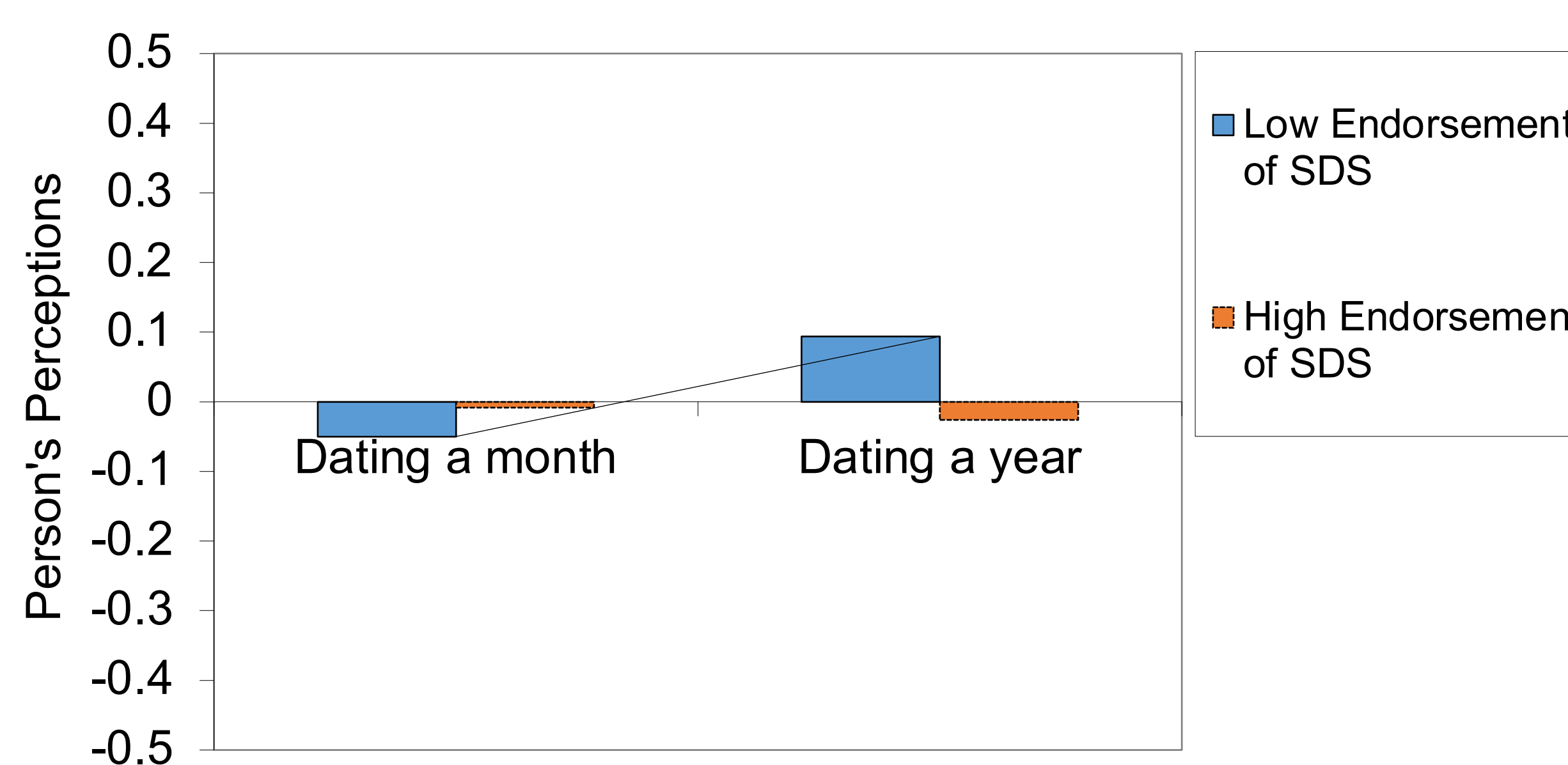
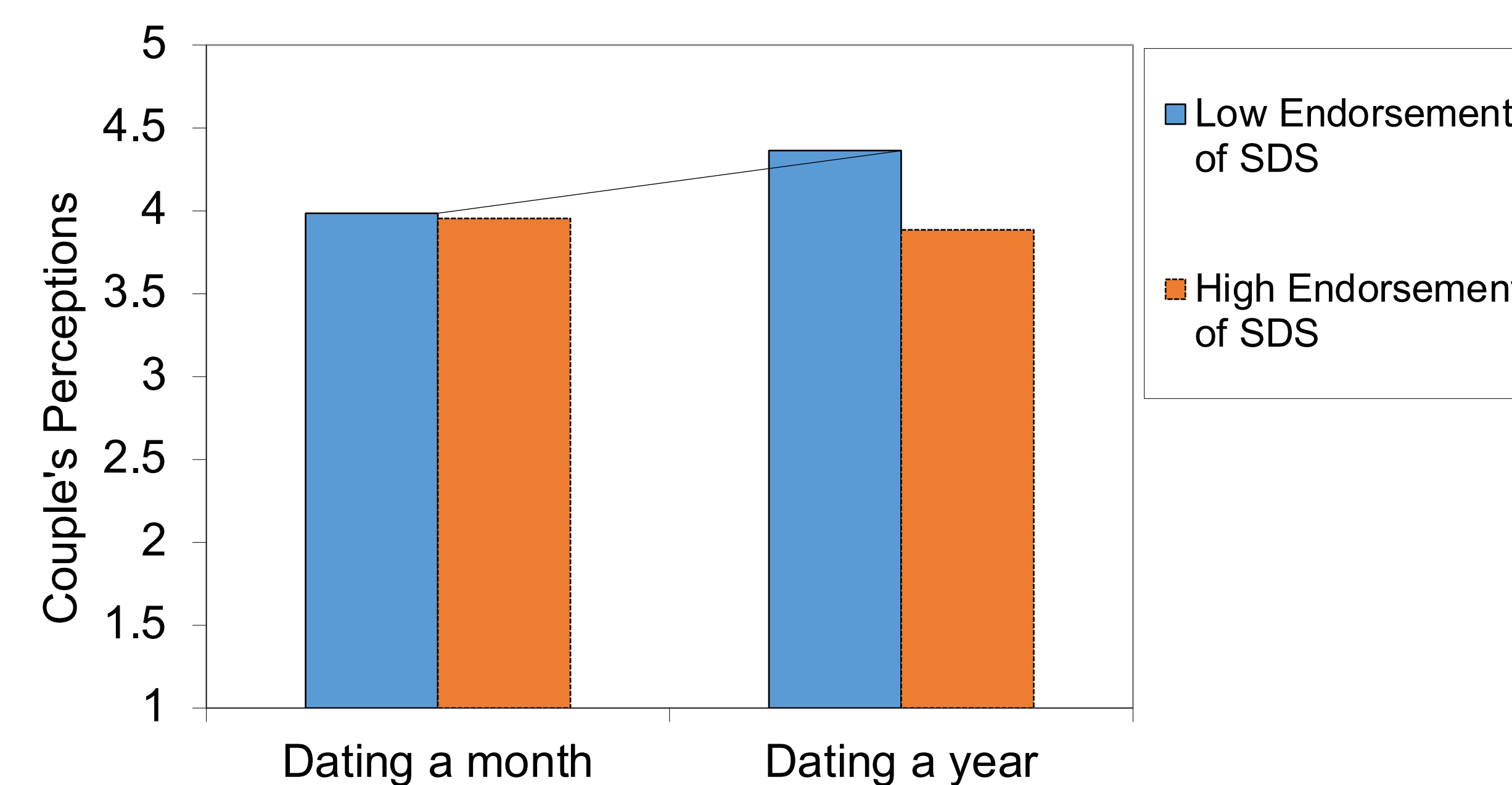
Couple’s Names: Lisa and Derek

Ages: 26 and 42

Location: Raleigh, North Carolina

Relationship Bio:

Lisa (age 26) and Derek (age 42) have been dating for almost a month. Lisa has two Golden Retrievers and enjoys volunteering at the local animal shelter. Derek likes to run and usually participates in the annual community half-marathon. As a couple, they both enjoy watching movies and traveling every chance they get. In fact, they hope to travel next month to Chimney Rock, a beautiful hiking location. Although they discussed possibly being exclusive with one another, both of them prefer to keep things casual for now.



Method

A sample of MTurk participants ($N=588$; 59.9% male) participated in our study. The median age was 35 ($M = 36.84, SD = 9.87$). Participants were presented with one of four vignettes describing a short biography of a fictitious couple with a 16-year age-gap. Participants then completed a series of measures to evaluate their perceptions of the couple (together) and as individuals (separately). Participants also reported their endorsement of the SDS.

The measures used were as follows:

- ❖ Couple Perception Scale: Original scale developed specifically to determine evaluations of the couple’s longevity (“*This relationship will probably result in marriage*”), appropriateness (“*This type of relationship is proper*”) and compatibility (“*This couple seems like a good match*”). (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80, n = 9$)
- ❖ Target Perception Scale (Marks & Fraley, 2005): Evaluating the man and the woman, separately. (Woman’s perceptions: Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90, n = 30$; Man’s perceptions: Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91, n = 30$)
- ❖ Scale for the Assessment of Sexual Standards among Youth (Emmerink et al., 2017): Assessing participants’ endorsement of the SDS. (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .98, n = 19$)

Results

In order to compare perceptions of the woman and the man simultaneously, a *person’s perceptions variable* was created by subtracting the woman’s perceptions score from the man’s perceptions score. If the person’s perceptions score is positive, it indicates that the man was perceived more favorably than the woman. If person’s perceptions score is negative, it indicates that the woman was perceived more favorably than the man.

A hierarchical regression was performed to examine our hypotheses and research questions of interest. We observed a main effect of gender of the older person for person’s perceptions ($\beta = -.190, p < .001$). In conditions when the woman is older, she is evaluated more favorably than the younger male partner. In addition, a main effect was observed for SDS endorsement. Higher endorsement of the SDS led to less favorable perceptions of both the woman ($\beta = -.129, p < .05$) and the man ($\beta = -.116, p < .05$).

We also observed a two-way interaction between relationship length and SDS endorsement for couple’s perceptions ($\beta = -.19, p < .01$). Lower SDS endorsement led to more favorable perceptions of long-term AGRs compared to short-term AGRs ($t = 2.65, p < .01$). Additionally, there was also a two-way interaction for person’s perceptions ($\beta = -.15, p < .05$). Lower SDS endorsement led to more favorable perceptions of the man (compared to the woman) in long-term AGRs and more favorable perceptions of the woman (compared to the man) in short-term AGRs ($t = 2.22, p < .05$).

Our results indicate that contrary to our prediction that older women would be evaluated negatively in AGRs, the opposite was found. This was especially evident for those participants who endorsed the SDS to a lower degree and evaluated short-term AGRs couples. These findings may indicate a positive shift in perceptions of older women’s sexuality in AGRs. A future qualitative study could examine more in-depth why such perceptions appear to be formed.