

# Chapter 43

## Age-Gap Relationships in Brazil and Ukraine: How Reading Literature Affects Them



Anna Chesnokova and Willie van Peer

Abstract Love comes in many forms, as we all know and as the quote holds. Some forms are more frequent than others. As a consequence, less frequent forms may be either tolerated or dismissed as deviant, and therefore socially sanctioned. And different cultures may deal with such forms very differently. In this chapter we look at one form that is less frequent, namely age-gap relations: love relations between either an older man and a considerably younger woman, or vice versa: an older woman and a considerably younger man.

Since it may be expected that nations differ in their attitudes toward such relationships, we investigated two that are (geographically and culturally) wide apart: Brazil and Ukraine.

We offer some examples of empirical methods (Empirical methods aim at knowledge that comes from observation and experience, i.e., evidence gathered through the senses that can be analyzed independently by anyone wishing to re-analyze the data gathered.) with which to investigate short time and longitudinal effects of confronting fictional love stories.

We report a case study, in which we checked how social views on intimate relationships involving a substantial age difference between partners were influenced by reading literary passages from canonical literature, focusing on age-gap relationships. The results cast light on the views on age-gap relations in these respective cultures and thereby highlight their national mentality. Additionally, the findings lend support to the idea that reading literature influences human attitudes.

**Keywords** Love · Age-gap relationships · Empirical research · Cultural attitudes · Literary reading · Effects of reading on perceptions of love

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### 43.1 Introduction: Age-Gap Relationships in Real and Fictional Worlds

We will start this chapter with a couple of questions to you as a reader.<sup>1</sup> In your circle of friends there are no doubt several (heterosexual) couples, people having a steady relationship, irrespective of whether they happen to be formally married or not. We guess that in many cases you will (more or less) know the relative ages of the partners. So here is our *first* question: how many of the couples that you know are the same age (i.e., born in the same year)?

We think we know the answer that you will give: *none*. It is quite rare for long-term relationships to have both partners of the same age. But if that is the case, then our *second* question is: how large is the age difference between the partners of the couples you know? Again, we think we know the answer: on average it is about 2–3 years. Which leads us to our *third* question: who is the elder in the partnership? And you know the answer as well as we do: it is the male partner (see Vanderheiden on cougars in this book).

Before you utter the objection that this may be just a western phenomenon: no, it is not. As far as we know, there is a worldwide pattern according to which females prefer their partners to be a bit older than themselves, and “[t]he worldwide average age difference between actual brides and grooms is three years” (Buss, 2003, 28). True, there are regional and cultural variations<sup>2</sup> (see also Vanderheiden’s chapter in this book). For instance, in France the average age difference between partners is less than 2 years, while in Iran it is more than 5 years (*ibid, idem*). So you will find few couples in which both partners have the same age. Isn’t that strange? You would expect young people forming relationships either to people of approximately the same age, or to have the difference split evenly across the sexes, so that sometimes the male is the elder, and sometimes the female. Again it is not so.

Why is that the case? Jokingly, one could cast the image of men as a bit behind mentally, so that in a partnership with a female they need a bit of a headstart, in order to be on the same intellectual level with women a couple of years younger than they are themselves. Be that as it may, there are very good evolutionary reasons why females prefer men who are a bit older. One motive pertains to income and economic resources, which rise with age, so if your husband is a bit older, a female’s position will be more secure. A second explanation relates to physical prowess, which increases in men until their early 30s. Maybe in present-day urban life bodily strength may not be that important, but the mechanisms for mate choice are deeply engrained in our ancestral brains, which evolved at a time when hunting, fishing, or tilling the earth provided the important nutritional ingredients to keep yourself alive, and more importantly still: to keep your children alive (see Bode et al.). A third reason for the age difference has to do with the emotional balance in men, which indeed increases with age: within the United States, for instance, “men become somewhat more emotionally stable, more conscious, and more dependable as they grow older” (Buss, 2003, 28); see also McCrae and Costa Jr. (1990), Gough (1980).

At the same time, the twenty-first century has brought certain fairly counter-intuitive and in a way counter-evolutionary trends, which you can see not only in

Hollywood couples, but also in families of top politicians (Karantzas, 2018). Thus recent research reported by *Psychology Today* (Patrick, 2019) has found that

despite potential stereotyping and stigma, age-gap relationships between younger men and older women continue to survive, and thrive,

and women in such relationships are more satisfied and more committed compared to younger women or to similarly aged partners.

Now let us turn from real world to that of literature—be it the life of writers themselves, or the characters they depict in their works. But before doing so, let us spell out what we understand by “love”. In what follows we shall consider love, following Fisher (1995) and Jankowiak (see his chapters in this book) and Fisher (Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992), as an emotion of mutual attraction and attachment, as “primary, panhuman emotions much like fear, anger, joy, sadness, and surprise” (Fisher, 1995, 24).

Literary authors living in happy long-lasting (i.e., decades-long) relationships in which they, the males, were considerably older, are easy to find. Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin (age difference of 12 years), Mark Twain and Olivia Langdon (a difference of 10 years), or Fyodor Dostoevsky and Anna Snitkina (25 years of difference) are the names that occur to us first. Similarly, Edgar Poe was twice as old as his wife, Virginia—who was just 13 at the time of their marriage.

The opposite pattern can be found too. The towering figure of Samuel Johnson comes to mind: at the age of 25, he married Elizabeth Porter, then 21 years older than him. She is said to have told her daughter that he was “the most sensible man [she] ever met”, and he, calling her tenderly “Tetty” or “Tetsy”, continued to recall her affectionately after her death at the age of 63. Elizabeth’s gravestone has the inscription in Latin: *Formosae, cultae, ingeniosae, pia* (meaning: *dedicated to the beautiful, elegant, talented, dutiful*).

More examples can be given. Balzac was only 26 when Madame de Bernay took him as her lover when she was 49, after she had borne nine children. In the same way, Agatha Christie married her second husband, Sir Max Mallowan, when she was 40 while he was just 26, and their marriage lasted for 45 years till the author’s death.

The relationship when a woman is older seems not to be always smooth for literary authors. Just think of George Sand’s transient affairs with Jules Sandeau, Alfred de Musset, or Frederic Chopin (all from 6 to 7 years her junior). Shakespeare may also come to one’s mind: Anne Hathaway was 8 years his senior when they married in 1582. We do not know for sure, but there is little, indeed very little, in the works of Shakespeare, showing affection for his wife. None of the 154 sonnets even obliquely refers to her<sup>1</sup>, and his testament only leaves her his second-best bed.

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<sup>1</sup> For an alternative point of view, see Boyd (2012, 59-61) where he argues that Sonnet 145, which had long been considered non-Shakespearean, is dedicated to Anne Hathaway.

With inspiration gained from the real world, age-gap couples when the male partner is older are often enough depicted in literature, and the relationships, just like in life, can work well—or not. The happy examples range from Charlotte Brontë's and Jane Austin's characters to a romance of a middle-aged teacher Bill Mor and a young artist Rain Carter in *The Sandcastle* by Iris Murdoch.

Equally numerous are the sad stories that can be recalled. Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina is about 20 years younger than her husband Alexei, and the unhappy marriage triggers her involvement with a young officer Vronsky. In Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert, the adult protagonist, is trapped in a disastrous love affair with Dolores who is just 12. Similarly, in Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* a beautiful Gypsy dancer Esmeralda is only 16 years old, while Claude Frolo, who is dramatically obsessed with her, is in his late 30s.

The opposite case, when a woman is considerably older than the man she is involved with, is rarer in fiction, and there are social reasons to that. Yet, we do read about happy moments like love affairs of a young man and a 79-year-old woman in Higgins' *Harold and Maude*, or a single mother in McMillan's *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, who, while on an island vacation, falls for a man half her age. Likewise, Mario Vargas Llosa's semi-autobiographical *Aunt Julia and the Script-writer* features an 18-year-old Mario falling in love with a 32-year-old divorcée Julia while Colette's *Cheri* focuses on the affair between the novel's title character and Lea, who is 24 years older than he is. Interestingly enough, the author herself had a (bad) first marriage to a man 14 years her senior and a (good) third marriage to a man 16 years her junior. And there is a sweet section of Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine* in which a young man and a woman over 90 have a series of deep conversations that are essentially a verbal love affair.

Quite predictably the unhappy narratives in literature dominate, so we have stories about Julien Sorel (19) and Louise de Rênal (30) in *The Red and the Black* by Stendhal, or more contemporary characters, like 39-year old Paule and 25-year old Simon in Sagan's *Aimez-vous Brahms?*, and Paul Roberts (19) and Susan MacLeod (48) in *The Only Story* by Julian Barnes.

## 43.2 Theoretical Background: How Fiction Can Shape Your Views

One's personality is partly genetically predetermined and firmly shaped by the age you are 30 (Whitbourne, 2015). Of course, next to genetics, cultural environment also plays a significant role (see Acevedo, Yadav and Bode et al. ). Does that mean that after one has entered the fourth decade of one's life, worldviews become rigid, and any alteration from now on is impossible? Fortunately, not, and fiction is found to be an important mechanism to change attitudes and beliefs. Djikic and Oatley (2014) show that fiction can engage readers in ways that enhance their personality qualities. Among other influences, they argue, reading literary texts augments one's social expertise by putting readers inside the minds of others. Being some kind of a "moral laboratory" (Hakemulder, 2000), fiction gives them the opportunity to explore the subjective world of its characters and take or reject their viewpoints (Frankman, 2017):

When you read fiction, you can be someone you'd never otherwise have the chance to become—another gender, another age, someone of another nationality or another circumstance. You can be an explorer, a scientist, an artist, a young and single mother or an orphaned cabin boy or a soldier.

When you take off the guise again—set down the book—you walk away changed. You understood things you didn't understand before, and that shapes your worldview.

As a result, as a reader you may develop openness and tolerance by way of empathy, and

it may also be possible to find the fulfillment you seek in your own long-term relationships (Whitbourne, 2015).

The idea that reading fiction enhances the feeling of empathy is, one may think controversially, applicable less to romantic novels, but rather to realistic ones, like Dickens's or Obrecht's (Bury, 2013). Kidd and Castano (2013) have found powerful experimental support for the hypothesis that literary fiction (though not popular fiction) enhances readers' ability to detect and understand other people's emotions, and this skill, usually termed Theory of Mind, in its turn, is vital in navigating complex social relationships. As the *Guardian* reports (8 October 2013), "[f]iction", they claim, "is not just a simulator of a social experience, it is a social experience". At the same time, Kidd counterparts that

[n]either do we argue that people should only read literary fiction; it's just that only literary fiction seems to improve Theory of Mind in the short-term. There are likely benefits of reading popular fiction—certainly entertainment. We just did not measure them.

Out of various literary genres, in this chapter we focus on those that depict love relationships between characters. Though some psychologists claim that reading romantic novels may be harmful for female readers, as it puts their expectation to the level that does not correspond to everyday reality (Deshpande, 2018), such narratives, according to others, among other psychological and social influences, are able to deepen understanding of people and relationships (Vargas, 2017):

When written with some care and insight, romance novels can provide lessons in love for people of any age. Protagonists in romance novels are not all bright-eyed teens who have fallen in love for the first time. In fact, some of the greatest romance novels involve people who have been in love too many times to count, or characters who haven't figured out how to navigate the dating world at all. Whether you're 20 or 50, there are always lessons to be learned about understanding others, communicating with them, and strengthening the relationships we have with people.

### 43.3 Context: Literature and Social Norms

Research shows that social context can influence our dealings with people, as we all have expectations of others that might be based on our personal experience, or on stereotypes we associate with certain contexts (Snyder & Stukas Jr., 1990). Besides, social norms, which are “generally accepted ways of thinking, feeling, or behaving that people in a group agree and endorse as right and proper” (Smith & Mackie, 2000, 594), also direct our perceptions of situations that surround us. Individuals look to social norms to gain an accurate understanding of and effectively respond to social circumstances, especially during times of uncertainty (Cialdini, 2000). Therefore, when we are not confident enough to make our own judgments, we may accept or condemn a person or an action by means of how we believe others in our community would react. This fact shows the greater importance of awareness to society’s influence upon us.

Social norms are usually referred to when thinking of community-related issues, such as littering, pollution, political discussions, or economic questions. When dealing with prejudice (see, for example, Brown, 1995), there are studies concerning racial, religious, and sexist issues. In this chapter, we intend to investigate whether such norms are also present in our cultures, concerning a specific form of love relation. This research deals with a more subtle prejudice, one that is not commonly referred to, as it supposedly does not affect society as much as the ones mentioned above.

Love affairs characterized by an explicit age gap may not be treated equally by different societies. Besides, people’s attitudes might differ according to who is older or younger in the relationship, as in some cultures it is common to see alliances between much older men and younger women, while the opposite is socially rejected and criticised.

There is a concern whether moral judgments and behavior can be triggered by an exterior stimulus (van Peer, Chesnokova, & Springer, 2017) and whether emotions play a role (Menninghaus et al., 2017; van Peer and Chesnokova, 2019). One of our inquiries is whether these emotions, when fostered by an outside factor, might influence people’s responses towards age-gap relationships. We intended to create an environment in which participants would be stimulated to feel such emotions, possibly being led to reflect upon the situation. As Miall and Kuiken (2002) claim, reading literature evokes various feelings in readers, and these might contribute to a change in their perception of a situation. Therefore, literature could be the proper trigger we were looking for. We supposed readers would be emotionally engaged with the literary texts provided (for narrative absorption, see Hakemulder et al., 2017), and might, consequently, shift their attitudes. Moreover, as literary texts mirror to a certain extent cultural backgrounds or critically reflect on them, they might push readers towards accepting or condemning certain kinds of behavior.

#### 43.4 Research Methodology: Reading Literary Texts About Age-Gap Relationships

The reported research aims at investigating readers’ reactions towards age-gap relationships in real and fictional worlds. In addition, it aims to investigate whether readers’ worldviews are influenced by literary texts and whether their attitudes change through reading. Additionally, as the project was carried out in two countries different in their ethnic make-up, their language, and their traditions, the results will also cast light on cultural differences and/or similarities in relation to this issue (for the research outline, see Chesnokova & Mendes, 2005).

We hypothesised that literature shapes readers’ attitudes to moral issues. We also expected to find significant differences between Brazilians’ and Ukrainians’ responses. Besides, we anticipated that in both cultures the case of a woman being older (henceforth—OW) would be treated with less social tolerance than the case when the older partner is a man (henceforth—OM).

The research was carried out among 240 Humanities students (120 per national condition) from three public universities in two countries: Brazil and Ukraine. The study was run in a conventional academic setting. Respondents’ age ranged from 17 to 53 in Brazil (with a mean of 24.9 and  $SD_{1/4}$  8.1) and from 19 to 25 in Ukraine (with a mean of 20.7 and  $SD_{1/4}$  1.3). The proportionally small number of male respondents (15 out of 120 in Brazil and 21 out of 120 in Ukraine) can be explained by the dominating presence of female students in the Humanities. The investigation of age and gender influence on the responses was beyond the scope of this project.

We opted for a five-point semantic differential scale as a research tool (van Peer, Hakemulder, & Zyngier, 2012; Viana et al., 2009) as it allowed measuring both the directionality of the response and its intensity. As a first stage, a pilot was run to select the adjectives to be subsequently used in the investigation. In order to obtain them, 26 randomly chosen respondents (16 Ukrainians and 10 Brazilians, all Humanities students, their age ranging from 20 to 26 in Brazil and from 17 to 25 in Ukraine) gave their free evaluation of age-gap love affairs as such.

As a result, 17 adjectives and adjective equivalents were chosen as the most frequently mentioned ones in both countries, and the opposites were selected:

- normal/abnormal;
- loyal/disloyal;
- predictable/unpredictable;
- interesting/boring;
- mature/immature;
- attractive/unattractive;
- reasonable/unreasonable;
- stable/unstable;
- exhibitionist/secretive;
- respectful/disrespectful;
- responsible/irresponsible;

- paternal (maternal)/equal;
- negative/positive;
- sexually driven/heart-driven;
- socially rejected/socially accepted;
- financially driven/disinterested;
- raising the social status/not influencing the social status.

The next stage consisted in selecting the appropriate design of the questionnaire. As we wanted to probe the influence of literary texts on social attitudes toward age-gap love, we needed passages from fiction in which such affiliations would be depicted. On top of that, in order to check the difference between the social acceptance of relationships involving an older man and the ones involving an older woman, we had to select fragments focusing on these two kinds of ties. As we did not want to guide respondents towards evaluating the age-gap relationships as either positive or negative, the texts had to contain descriptions of both happy and frustrating moments of such alliances. Finally, since we did not want any influence from respondents' own cultures, we opted for not using Brazilian or Ukrainian texts.

There was no major difficulty in finding a text for an OM case, as it is quite common to picture an older man falling in love or feeling sexually attracted to a woman who has just blossomed. However, it was harder to find an appropriate text for an OW case. Besides, the narratives had to have been translated into Portuguese and Ukrainian or Russian (on bilingualism in Ukraine see Sergeyeva & Chesnokova, 2008) since we wanted to use respondents' native languages in the questionnaires to avoid any possible misunderstandings.

After a thorough search, we opted for *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell (1936/1993) and *Theatre* by W. Somerset Maugham (1937/2001). In the former novel, Scarlett O'Hara, a teenager at the beginning of the book, is involved with Rhett Butler, who is in his 30s. In the second narrative, the middle-aged Julia Lambert plunges into an affair with Tom, who is younger than her son. Both novels focus on ups and downs of such alliances with the age gap factor being one of the key issues of oscillations in the emotional confrontations.

We selected four extracts from these novels: two of them describing happiness, one per case, and the other two describing frustration. The length of the passages ranged from 157 to 385 words in the Russian translation and from 126 to 216 words in the Portuguese one. For the full text of the passages see the Appendix.

The research design involved 12 groups (20 participants each) (Table 43.1):

In the main part of the experiment, participants ranked their emotional attitudes toward age-gap relations as such, separately for the two options (OM and OW), on a five-point scale. In the introductory part of the questionnaire, respondents indicated their gender and age. Room for free commentary was also provided. At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents gave their formal consent to participate in the study.

Control group participants evaluated age-gap relationships without having read any text, while the experimental groups did the same after being exposed to literary passages where such emotions were depicted as demonstrating: (1) happiness (OM); (2) frustration (OM); (3) happiness (OW); and (4) frustration (OW).



Table 43.1 Participant grouping

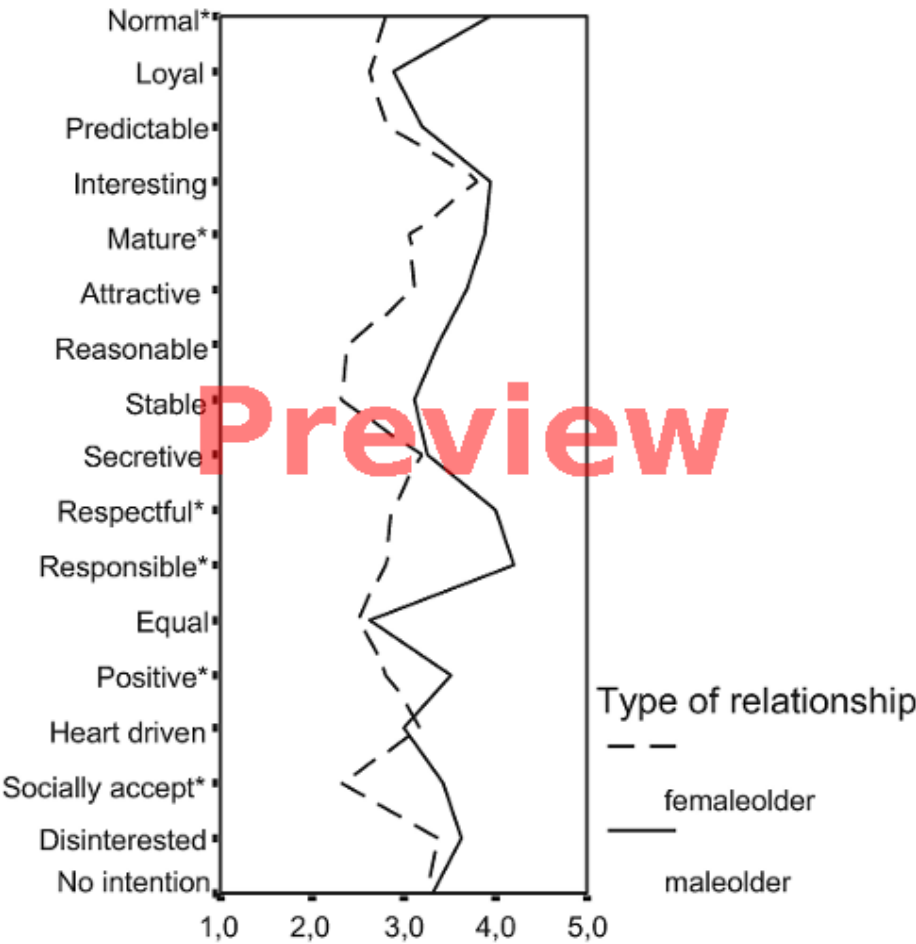
Group	Nationality	Text	Number of participants
1	Brazilian	OM no text (control group)	20
2		OW no text (control group)	20
3		OM happiness	20
4		OM frustration	20
5		OW happiness	20
6		OW frustration	20
7	Ukrainian	OM no text (control group)	20
8		OW no text (control group)	20
9		OM happiness	20
10		OM frustration	20
11		OW happiness	20
12		OW frustration	20

The data collected were analysed statistically in line with the tenets of using the empirical methodology in the Humanities (van Peer et al., 2012; van Peer and Chesnokova, 2022). The following section reports the results of this study.

### 43.5 Findings: Does Reading Fiction Shape Your Views?

For the control groups’ data, an ANOVA test was run in order to check whether respondents within each national sample treated OM and OW relationships in the same way. The Ukrainian control groups’ data yielded statistically significant differences between the two conditions (OM and OW) for roughly one-third of the variables: “normal” ( $p = 0.000$ ), “mature” ( $p = 0.023$ ), “respectful” ( $p = 0.008$ ), “responsible” ( $p = 0.008$ ), “positive” ( $p = 0.026$ ), and “socially accepted” ( $p = 0.004$ ). The differences in the Brazilian control groups appeared to be not statistically significant. Figure 43.1 below shows the mean responses of the Ukrainian control groups (straight line for the OM case and dashed line for the OW case). The variables with the statistically significant results reported above are marked with asterisks. As can be seen in the graph, in the Ukrainian sample OM relationships are, on the whole, considered much more positive than OW ones: the latter are evaluated as less normal, less mature, less respectful, less responsible, less positive and by far less socially acceptable.

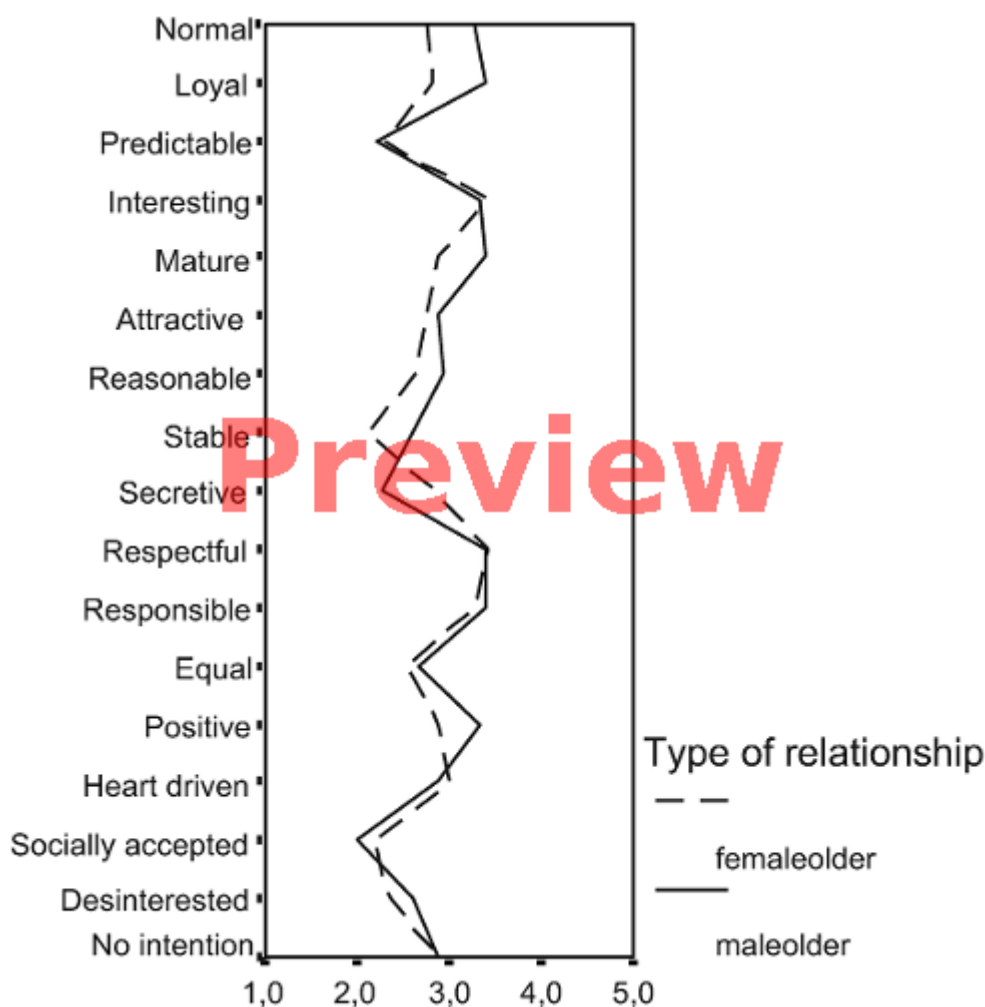
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**Fig. 43.1**  
Mean responses of Ukrainian control groups: the OM and OW cases (authors' own construction)

A line graph represents 17 variables on the y-axis versus 1,0 to 5,0 x-axis values. Both female older and male older data exhibit different fluctuating trends, while variables with asterisks, namely, normal, mature, respectful, responsible, positive, and socially accept are observed.

Figure 43.2 below, showing the responses of the Brazilian control groups, demonstrates *no* statistically significant differences between the evaluations of the two cases: Brazilian respondents rated the OM and OW relationships almost equally, and somewhere in the middle of the scale.



A line graph represents 17 variables on the y-axis versus 1,0 to 5,0 x-axis values. Both female older and male older data exhibit near-similar fluctuating trends.

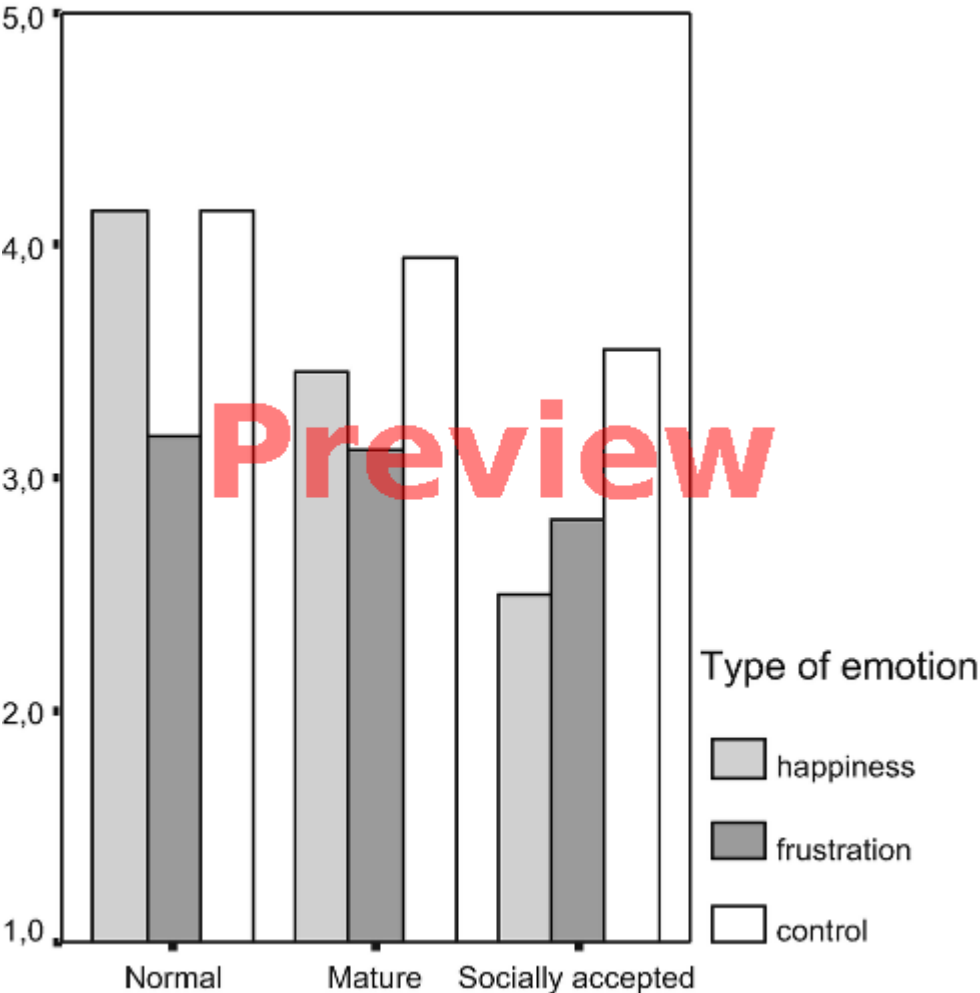
**Fig. 43.2**

Mean responses of Brazilian control groups: the OM and OW cases (authors' own construction)

After we analysed the control groups' data and obtained the information about general attitudes to age-gap relationships in the two cultures, we set to the second stage of the experiment. As we aimed at checking whether reading literature influences attitudes towards age-gap relationships, we compared (within each national group) evaluations of such alliances by respondents who

1. read the passage about happy moments;
2. read the passage about frustrating moments, and

3.  
the control group who read no literary fragment.  
Statistically significant differences between the evaluation of Ukrainian respondents of the OM case were found on three variables: “normal” ( $p = 0.007$ ), “mature” ( $p = 0.019$ ) and “socially accepted” ( $p = 0.015$ ). Figure 43.3 below demonstrates the means for the three variables across three conditions: reading the “happy” text, reading the “frustration” text and reading no text (control group).



A grouped column chart measures the means of 3 emotions for 3 variables via 1,0 to 5,0 y-axis values. For happiness, frustration, and control, normal has around 4,1, 3,2, and 4,1, mature has 3,4, 3,1, and 3,9, and socially accepted has 2,5, 2,8, and 3,5.

**Fig. 43.3**

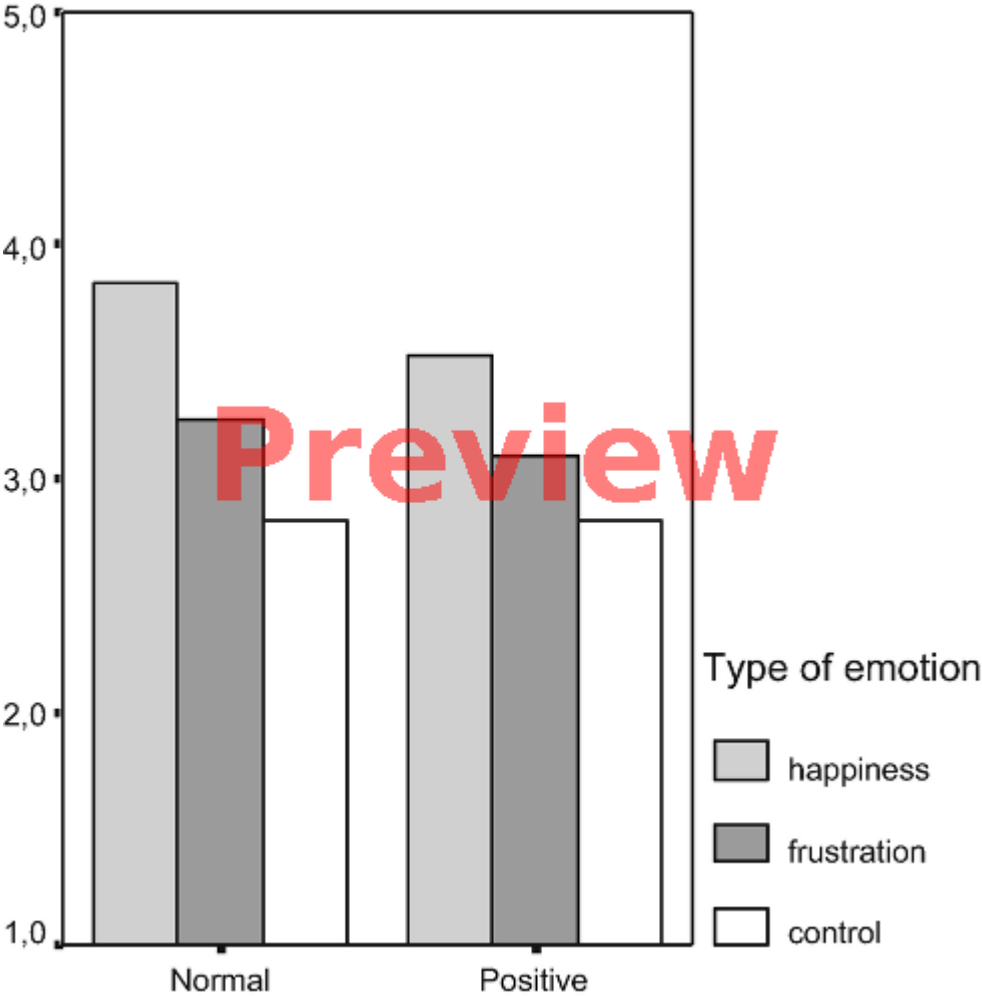
Mean responses of Ukrainian groups: the OM case (authors’ own construction)

As can be seen from the figure, for the OM case, there is a difference

between the responses of the control group and the group who read the literary passage about frustration in the relationship: the evaluations of the experimental group are lower and tend to be more neutral, approaching 3 on a scale of 5.

The group that read the “happy” passage evaluated the OM case as more normal, more mature, but, unexpectedly, less socially acceptable than the group that read the “frustrated” passage.

The comparison between the reactions of Ukrainian respondents of the control groups and the experimental ones towards the OW case yielded statistically significant differences for only two variables: “normal” ( $p = 0.042$ ) and (tendentially) “positive” ( $p = 0.060$ ). Figure 43.4 below gives the means for the two variables across the same three conditions: reading the “happy” text, reading the “frustration” text and reading no text (control group).



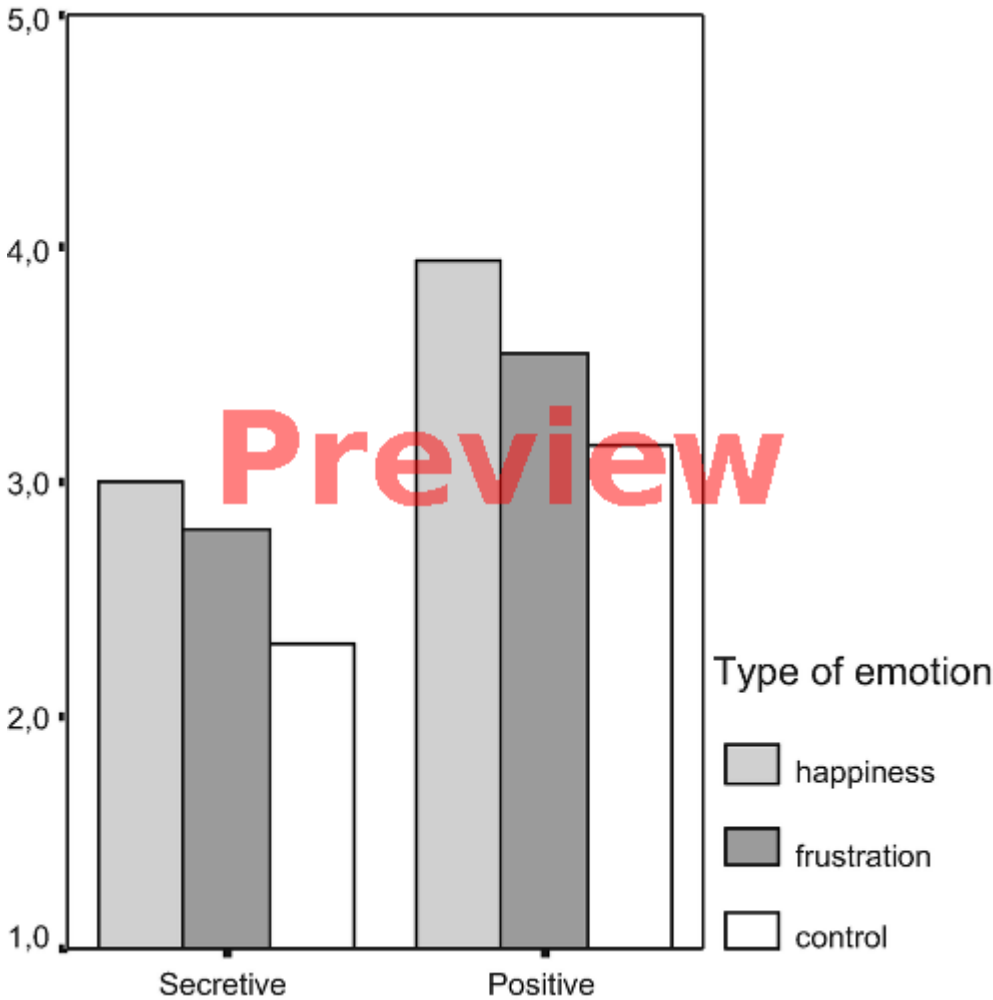
A grouped column chart measures the means of 3 emotions for 2 variables via 1,0 to 5,0 y-axis values. For happiness, frustration, and control, normal has around 3,8, 3,3, and 2,8, and positive has 3,5, 3,1, and 2,8.

**Fig. 43.4**

Mean responses of Ukrainian groups: the OW case (authors' own construction)

As the figure clearly illustrates, for the OW case, there is a significant increase in the ratings of the variables “normal” and “positive” in comparison with the control group. Both the group who read the “happy” and the one that was exposed to the “sad” text evaluated the OW case as more normal and more positive, thus supporting the idea that literature indeed softens socially controversial issues. It is remarkable that the evaluations became more positive irrespective of whether the passage the readers were exposed to focused on happy or frustrating moments in the relationship, and this pattern is very different from that of the OM case demonstrated in Fig. [43.3](#).

For the Brazilian participants who read the OM text, the values with statistic significance appeared to be higher for just 2 variables out of a list of 17 adjectives: “secretive” ( $p = 0.040$ ) and (tendentially) “positive” ( $p = 0.057$ ). The difference is illustrated in Fig. [43.5](#) below.

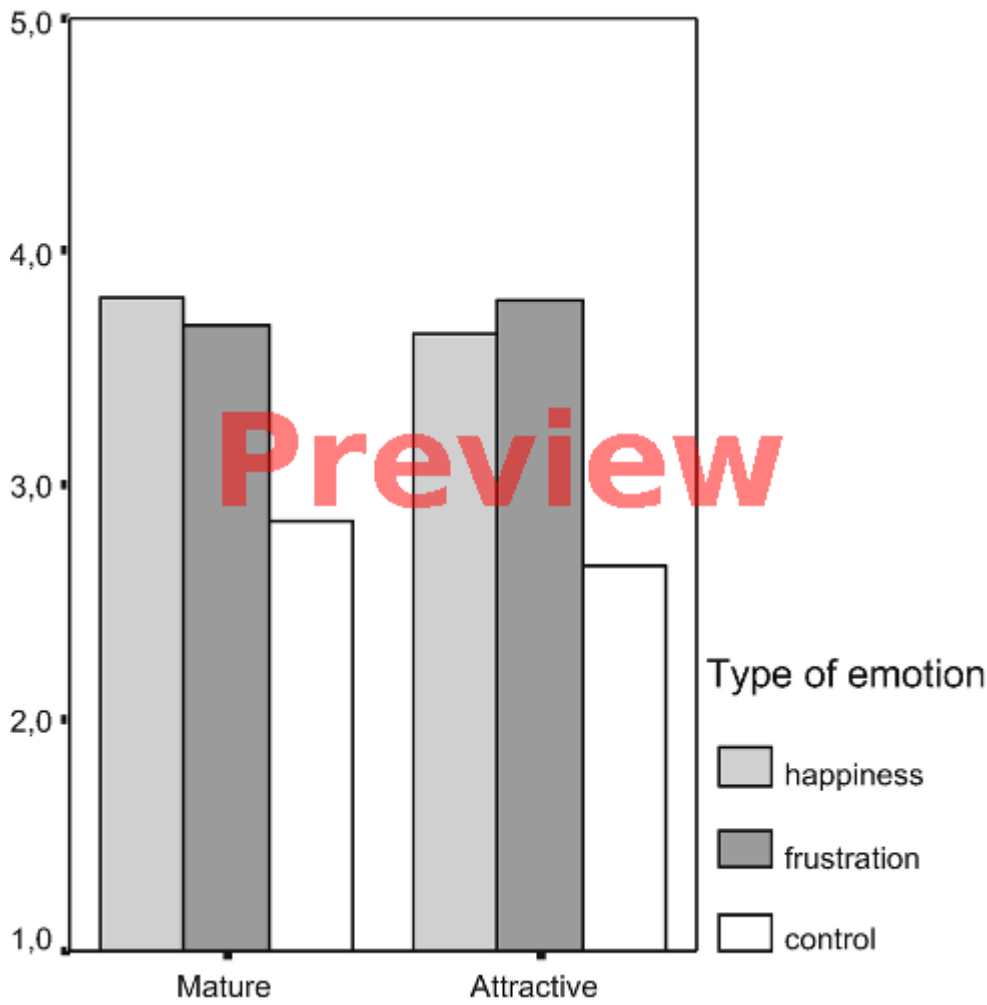


A grouped column chart measures the means of 3 emotions for 2 variables via 1,0 to 5,0 y-axis values. For happiness, frustration, and control, secretive has around 3,0, 2,8, and 2,3, and positive has 3,9, 3,5, and 3,2.

**Fig. 43.5**

Mean responses of Brazilian groups: the OM case (authors’ own construction)

Finally, Fig. [43.6](#) below demonstrates mean evaluations Brazilian participants attributed to the OW case.



A grouped column chart measures the means of 3 emotions for 2 variables via 1,0 to 5,0 y-axis values. For happiness, frustration, and control, mature has around 3,8, 3,7, and 2,8 and attractive has 3,65, 3,8, and 2,6.

**Fig. 43.6**

Mean responses of Brazilian groups: the OW case (authors’ own construction)

The respondents of this national sample who had read the literary passages showed a much more positive attitude in comparison to the control group in the variables “mature” ( $p = 0.009$ ) and “attractive” ( $p = 0.010$ )—again irrespective of whether the “happy” or “sad” text was read. The respondents who were exposed to literary passages evaluated the OW relationships as significantly more mature and more attractive in comparison to the control group.



## 43.6 Discussion

The reported results indicate that literary texts change people's beliefs towards certain controversial social issues, attitudes to age-gap relationships in particular. The experimental groups, who read the literary texts, indeed showed a difference from the control groups, both Ukrainian and Brazilian ones. It seems that literature does affect participants' attitudes in cases in which the original response was rather

Fig. 43.4 Mean responses of Ukrainian groups: the OW case (authors' own construction)

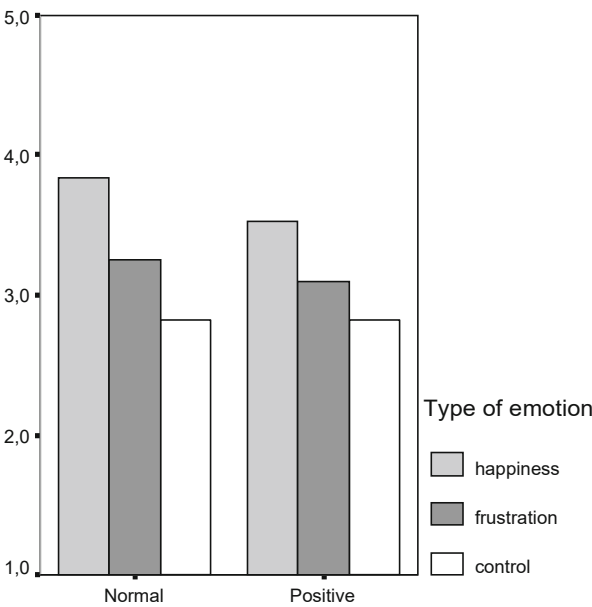
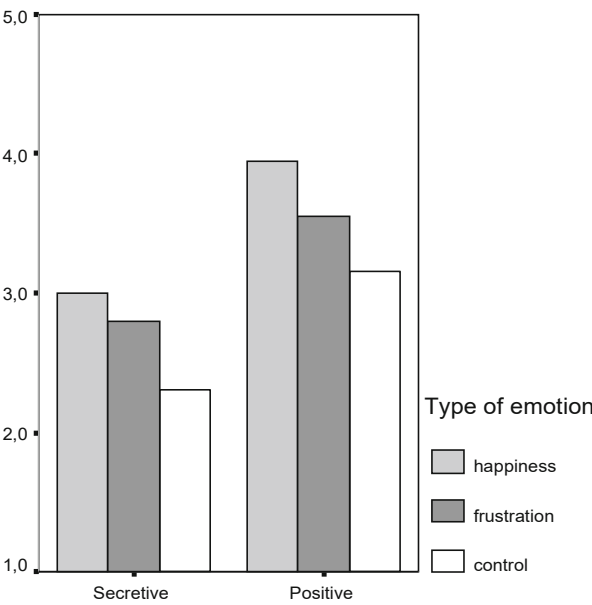
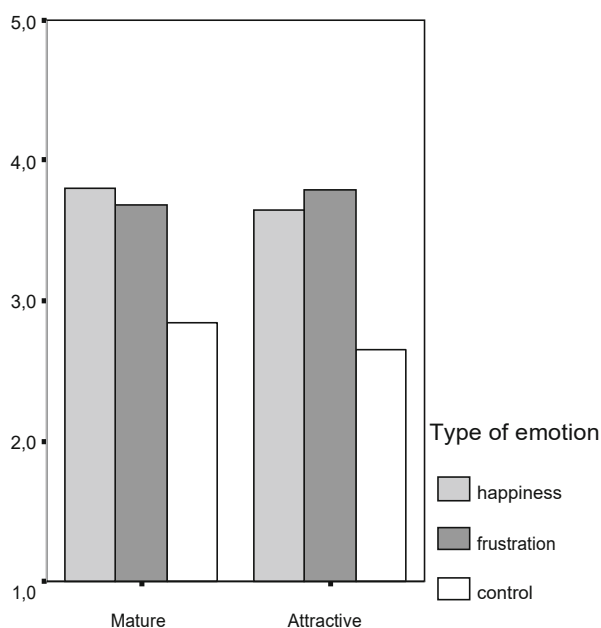


Fig. 43.5 Mean responses of Brazilian groups: the OM case (authors' own construction)



negative. For instance, in the Ukrainian sample, participants of the control group reacted quite negatively to the OW case. Readers' evaluation of this type of relationship became more positive when participants were exposed to a literary text (be it happy or frustrating). This might be an indication that reading literature

Fig. 43.6 Mean responses of Brazilian groups: the OW case (authors' own construction)



softens people's attitudes towards issues that are not accepted by society. The influence of reading the literary texts in Brazil is less outspoken, due to the fact that cultural attitudes in this country were more subtle, and this is what the control groups' response to both OM and OW cases in this sample demonstrated.

Additionally, the results lend support to our hypothesis of cultural differences between Brazil and Ukraine in treating age-gap relationships *per se*. Our initial anticipation that the OW case would get more negative evaluation in both countries was not borne out for Brazil. Brazilian respondents evaluated both OM and OW cases almost equally, with values around the neutral point. At the same time, Ukrainian participants attributed more negative values to the OW case. This could be the influence of mass media and popular culture, as in Brazil many examples of such relationships have been commented on, either in real life or in fictional works, such as soap operas. In spite of being equally popular with the Ukrainian audience, Brazilian soap operas obviously do not have that much effect on local stereotypes: screened mostly in South America, they seem distant and fairytale-like.

Further research should investigate differences between the gender and age of participants and their attitudes to age-gap relationships. Moreover, as both novels we used in this study are third-person narratives, it seems worthwhile to verify whether narrative perspective plays a role and whether results would be different with the first-person texts. Finally, both texts are written from a female perspective, which might also be taken into consideration in further studies of the topic.

## 43.7 Conclusion

This chapter has investigated, in the first place, social attitudes toward age-gap relations, and we found considerable cultural differences in this respect, though research shows that love in such relationship is not different from more “standard” relationships. More importantly for literary studies, however, was our investigation of the influence exerted by reading literary fragments narrating happy or frustrating episodes in the story of age-gap couples. Although significant differences with the control group were found on only a few variables, the results nevertheless showed that reading (brief fragments) about such relations changed people’s attitudes toward them. We believe this is yet another illustration of the power of literature, which is completely in line with the findings of Kidd and Castano (2013). While not being a replication of their study, the results point in the same direction: reading literary texts does exert an influence on readers’ cognition, emotion, attitudes, and sometimes also on behaviour (for more research, see Hakemulder, 2000; Gibbs, 2013; Koopman, 2016; Kuijpers, 2014).

Yet many scholars in literary studies and philosophy—less so in history (see, for instance, Darnton, 1996), deny such an influence. No matter how strange this is, the denial is widespread, and the prototypical essay in this respect is the one by Stollnitz (1991)—who never replied to the criticism voiced over it by van Peer (1995). It is irrational to disagree with this affect of literature because the general assumption in the social sciences is that everything people do and encounter has an influence of its own—even chewing chewing-gum has cognitive effects (see the very persuasive overview by Weijenberg, Scherder, and Lobbezoo (2011)). But if this has an influence, then being immersed for days or weeks in gruesome, exhilarating, or heartbreaking stories should definitely have an impact, of which we hope to have persuaded the dissenters.

Thus we would urge our literary colleagues to reflect on their position of dissent by instead joining the empirical branch of literary studies, and engage in research about the *real* effects of reading—effects about which we still know far too little.

## Appendix

Though in the research the languages of the questionnaires were Portuguese and Russian, here we append the original versions of the passages read in the experiment.

### A.1 The OM Case (“Happiness” Passage)

...she awoke, cold with sweat, sobbing brokenly...

Rhett was leaning over her when she woke, and without a word he picked her up in his arms like a child and held her close, his hard muscles comforting, his wordless murmuring soothing, until her sobbing ceased.

"Oh, Rhett, I was so cold and so hungry and so tired and I couldn't find it. I ran through the mist and I ran but I couldn't find it."

"Find what, honey?"

"I don't know. I wish I did know."

"Is it your old dream?"

"Oh, yes!"

He gently placed her on the bed, fumbled in the darkness and lit a candle. In the light his face with blood-shot eyes and harsh lines was as unreadable as stone. His shirt, opened to the waist, showed a brown chest covered with thick black hair. Scarlett, still shaking with fright, thought how strong and unyielding that chest was, and she whispered: "Hold me, Rhett."

"Darling!" he said swiftly, and picking her up he sat down in a large chair, cradling her body against him.

"Oh, Rhett, it's awful to be hungry."

"It must be awful to dream of starvation after a seven-course dinner including that enormous crawfish." He smiled but his eyes were kind.

"Oh, Rhett, I just ran and ran and hunt and I can't ever find what it is I am hunting for. It's always hidden in the mist. I know if I could find it, I'd be safe forever and ever and never be cold or hungry again."

"Is it a person or a thing you're hunting?"

"I don't know. I never thought about it. Rhett, do you think I'll ever dream that I get there to safety?"

"No," he said, smoothing her tumbling hair. "I don't. Dreams aren't like that. But I do think that if you get used to being safe and warm and well fed in your everyday life, you'll stop dreaming that dream. And, Scarlett, I am going to see that you are safe."

"Rhett, you are so nice."

"Thanks for the crumbs from your table, Mrs. Dives. Scarlett, I want you to say to yourself every morning when you wake up: 'I can't ever be hungry again and nothing can ever touch me so long as Rhett is here and the United States government holds out.'"

## A.2 The OM Case ("Frustration" Passage)

...he annoyed her. And he annoyed her frequently.

He was in his mid-thirties, older than any beau she had ever had, and she was as helpless as a child to control and handle him as she had handled beaux nearer her own age. He always looked as if nothing had ever

surprised him and much had amused him and, when he had gotten her into a speechless temper, she felt that she amused him more than anything in the world. Frequently she flared into open wrath under his expert baiting, for she had Gerald's Irish temper along with the deceptive sweetness of face she had inherited from Ellen. Heretofore she had never bothered to control her temper except in Ellen's presence. Now it was painful to have to choke back words for fear of his amused grin. If only he would ever lose his temper too, then she would not feel at such a disadvantage.

### A.3 The OW Case ("Happiness" Passage)

She had decided how she was going to treat him. She would be amiable, but distant. She would take a friendly interest in his work and ask him about his examination. Then she would talk to him about Roger. Roger was seventeen now and in a year would be going to Cambridge. She would insinuate the fact that she was old enough to be his mother. She would act as if there had never been anything between them and he would go away, never to see her again except across the footlights, half convinced that the whole thing had been a figment of his fancy. But when she saw him, so slight, with this hectic flush and his blue eyes, so charmingly boyish, she felt a sudden pang. Evie closed the door behind him. She was lying on the sofa and she stretched out her arm to give him her hand, the gracious smile of Madame Récamier on her lips, but he flung himself on his knees and passionately kissed her mouth. She could not help herself, she put her arms round his neck and kissed him as passionately.

### A.4 The OW Case ("Frustration" Passage)

It was like a knife in her heart. He had never spoken to her in that tone before. But she laughed lightly and getting up took the whisky he had poured out for her and sat down in a chair opposite him. The movement he had made, the words he had spoken, were instinctive and he was a trifle abashed. He avoided her glance and his face once more bore a sulky look. The moment was decisive. For a while they were silent. Julia's heart beat painfully...

"My dear, I'm so terribly fond of you."

"I know, and I'm terribly fond of you. You're great fun to go about with and you're always so well turned out, you're a credit to any woman. I've liked going to bed with you and I've a sort of notion you've liked going to bed with me. But let's face it, I've never been in love with you any more than you've been in love with me. I knew it couldn't last. Sooner or later you were bound to fall in love and that would end it..."

The moment he had gone she turned out the lights and went to the window. She peered cautiously through the curtains... Tears, tears that nobody could see, rolled down her cheeks. She was miserably unhappy.

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