DETERMINANTS OF AGE IDENTITIES AMONG MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Midlife is the time when a person constructs a sense of self-identity in relation to aging, which is an expression of their inner experience and views of aging that shape the identity of their future aging and affect their preparedness for later life as older adults (60 years and above). While research has looked at older adults' self-perceptions of ageing, less is known about the middle-aged cohort and in particular, middle-aged women in Malaysia. Our study is based on the view that women's ageing experience is different from their male counterparts' and thus there is a need to consider ageing as a gender specific phenomenon. We investigate how middle-aged women in Malaysia talk about aging, with the aim of identifying their discursive constructions of age identities and the associated factors. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews with middle-aged women as respondents, the study draws on the theories of social constructionism and social identity, and Van Leeuwen's social actors and social actions' framework for the analysis. The findings show that the respondents generally construct 'younger' and 'older' identities based on 'felt age'. Respondents' 'desired age' are to be younger than their chronological age. And they construct 'perceived old age' as early middle-aged and late middle-aged. And these identities relate to specific aspects such as social roles, physical conditions, declining health conditions and mental processes, among others, that impact their positive and negative perceptions of aging. The findings could help to provide better awareness about women aging differently from men, and specifically that Active Aging and Healthy Aging programs should not only focus on the older adult cohort (as is the case currently) but also target the middle-aged cohort to enhance the quality of the cohort's aging experiences that affect their later aging experiences and lifestyle choices.

Keywords: age identities, middle-aged women, social constructionism, social identity

INTRODUCTION

Women play many roles in society, including daughters, mothers, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers. Historically, they have evolved from being solely housewives to becoming entrepreneurs and professionals. Importantly, it has been a breakthrough to see women in leadership positions in their organizations (Mustafa *et al*., 2019). Despite this, women's employment rates in Malaysia are lower particularly after 50 years of age, as compared to upper- and high-income countries. It is also still common for women to be unpaid family workers (World Bank Group, 2020; Syed Salleh & Mansor, 2020). As an outcome of gender roles, they always play crucial roles in both paid and unpaid caregiving (UNECE, 2020). Consequently, women especially in from the middle-aged cohort have been pushed into what is known as 'the sandwich generation'. They have to look after both their growing children and elderly parents at the same time (Ahmad *et al*., 2018; Norzareen & Nobaya, 2010). Hence, they are overburdened with the responsibilities of children, parents, household and work (Noor & Isa, 2020). Tang *et al*. (2020) mention that the brunt of the aging society falls on women's shoulders as they provide informal care not only for their own families but also for their elderly parents. Syed Salleh and Mansor (2020) and Lim and Rasdi (2019) highlight that working women tend to quit their jobs voluntarily due to their family responsibilities. Caring for aging parents has become an additional role for women (Ahmad & Abdullah, 2013). In the long run, the health and well-being of the women from the sandwich generation are adversely affected because of hectic routines and lifestyles (Noor & Isa, 2020). In this sense, the women's double caregiving roles have adverse effects on their physical and mental health, finances, relationships, and employment (Demitz, 2017). Considering this gender role inequity, women face disproportionate disadvantages in a growing aging population society, known as the 'feminization of aging' (UNECE, 2020).

The midlife period is a time when women undergo major physical changes (Anderson, 2019). In western society, midlife is perceived as a time of decline, especially for women (Furman, 2013). The effects of aging on middle-aged women are more pronounced than on men. The obvious physical changes are wrinkles, weight gain, grey hair, loose skin and skin pigmentation (Rawat and Srivastava, 2020). Women also experience menopause during this stage because of their declining reproductive functions. Menopause is associated with physical and physiological changes in hormones. This impacts women's moods and self-image as well. Additionally, they are jeopardized with the forever youth and beauty concept all over through television, social media, advertisement or movies (Rawat and Srivastava, 2020). In other words, they are subjected to 'double standard aging' in which men are allowed to age gracefully in society while women are not. As a result, middle-aged women become particularly concerned about aging and feel uncomfortable and unhappy that they are aging (Diah, 2019; Gordon, 2019). Due to their fear of aging, middle-aged women become the main consumers of anti-aging products that promote forever youth. The youth and beauty culture in our society tends to lead to women feeling unattractive and undesirable as they age (Diah, 2019). Middle-aged women from the current generation are more susceptible to media pressure and aging problems than previous generations (Gordon, 2019).

Evidently, women's life course is different from men's, leading to the consequences of feminization of aging such as chronic diseases and poverty. A more gender-sensitive approach is needed to study and understand women's life stages. However, in Malaysia context, there is a lack of understanding on women's aging as being different from men's aging which eventually leads to a lack of such knowledge and awareness in the context of the feminization of aging. Considering this, our study focuses on understanding Malaysian women's aging specifically middle-aged women. According to The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (1998b), middle-aged refers to human adulthood between the ages of 40 and 60. However, the definition of middle age is generally subjective, with no specific number (Rawat and Srivastava, 2020; Sim *et al*., 2020). Cohort studies use different age range to define middle-aged adults, namely 40-59 (Subramanian, 2019), 50-58 (Diah, 2019), 40-64 (Sim *et al*., 2020) and 42-56 (Anderson, 2019). According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2013), those who are 60 years and older are considered older adults (following the United Nations' definition of older adults). Additionally, the mandatory retirement age in Malaysia is 60 years old. Therefore, the upper age limit for the middle age group is defined as 59 years. Assuming that, the age range for the middle-aged group in this study is 40 to 59 years.

According to Subramanian (2019), a person develops a sense of self-identity during midlife. Self-identity is known as a compass for guiding one throughout life. Self-identity is also referred to as establishing cognitive-affective representation. Such as, individuals explain their experiences through their identities, which, in turn, can be influenced by their experiences (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003). In the process of aging, age becomes a unique and permeable part of a person's identity (Howard, 2000). The concept of age identity encompasses both specific aspects of personal aging and general notions of old age (Macia *et al*., 2012). It is a process of defining oneself as part of an age group, followed by the desire to distinguish oneself from others, which gives a feeling of self-worth (Jose *et al*., 2022). In a social context, age-based identities shape people's well-being in profound ways. In light of this, it is essential to understand how middle-aged women construct their age identities when talking about their age-related experiences.

Our study extends upon previous studies on age identities (e.g., Sabatini *et al*., 2021, Shinan-Altman & Werner, 2019 and Dolberg & Ayalon, 2018). To date, very little research has been undertaken on age identities for a particular cohort in Malaysia. Therefore, we address this gap in research about the aging population in Malaysia and examine middle-aged women's age identities and the implications of their constructed identities on their later age experiences as older adults. Our study adopts theories of social constructionism and social identity to investigate the discursive construction of age identities among middle-aged women. The incorporation of these two theories will provide a more in-depth understanding of the age identities of middle-aged women to see how age identities are represented by middle-aged women and the associated factors. For that purpose, we draw on Van Leeuwen's (2008) analytic framework of the representation of social actors and social actions.

With age identity as the central tenet of our study, we aim to answer the following research objectives:

i. To examine middle-aged women's age identity (felt age, desired age and perceived old age).
ii. To examine the factors associated with the women's age identity (felt age, desired age and perceived old age).

AGE IDENTITIES

The current study focuses on the construction of age identities among middle-aged women. Generally, the concept of age identity refers to how an individual assesses his/her age subjectively based on social and cultural influences (Kaufman and Elder, 2002), It originates from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1984) and sociology (Kaufman and Elder, ibid). In this sense, the subjective sense of age is developed by an individual's diverse social experiences such as social identities, social roles, life course conceptions and socioeconomic status (Diehl *et al*., 2014). An individual's assessments of age are fundamental to both their personal and social identity. Therefore, a person's age identity can be viewed as part of their overall identity. As life courses change, they will reassess and reconstruct their concepts of age identities strategically to change their perceptions of themselves (Kaufman and Elder, 2002). In this regard, age identities influence their personal development across their lifetime despite biases. Moreover, they represent how an individual views aging. Our study addresses Kaufman and Elder's (2002), dimensions of age identities namely, felt age, other age, desired age, perceived old age and desired longevity. An individual's felt age, also known as subjective age, is the age they believe they are (Barrett, 2003). Consequently, the individuals' felt ages may differ from their chronological ages, as they may feel younger or older than they are. An individual's felt ages may also be congruent with their chronological ages (Sabatini *et al*., 2021). As defined by Kaufman and Elder (2002), desired age is the age one would like to be. Desired age is highly associated with individuals' acceptance and reconciliation of their aging process. Perceived old age refers to one's core definition of when old age begins (Demakakos *et al*., 2007). Felt age and desired age are dimensions based on self-evaluation while perceived old age refers to general evaluation (Kaufman & Elder, 2002).

Age identities have both positive and negative implications (Steitz & McClary, 1988). People's attitudes and feelings are affected by their age identities because age has personal and social meaning (Logan *et al*., 1992). An individual's age identity has profound effects on their physical health in later life. Good physical health is one of the vital standards for youthful age identities. Youthful age identities and positive perceptions of aging are linked to psychological development, well-being, health, and longevity (Demakakos *et al*., 2007). Besides that, the younger the age identities, the higher the possibility of life satisfaction (Barak & Stern, 1986), high work engagement (Ye & Post, 2020) and successful aging (Demakakos *et al*., 2007). Individuals also tend to have higher morale and self-esteem when they believe they are younger. According to Furstenberg (1989), it is common that women's chronological ages differ from their subjective ages. In fact, women's chronological age and health directly influence their subjective age. And their subjective age is highly associated with their life satisfaction (Steitz & McClary, 1988). Previous studies, such as Pinquart & Sorensen (2001) and Barrett (2005) uncover that the preference for a youthful identity is significantly higher among women. This is due to men and women of middle age with different experiences in health, family, and work. In addition, other factors such as gender inequality and women's negative aging experiences are associated with their preference for youthful identity.

The discussion so far has highlighted the importance, various dimensions, and implications of age identity on women. Studying women's age identities allows us to gain insights into how women perceive their age, the aging process as well as the

factors that make them feel young or old. Our study chooses the dimensions of felt age, desired age and perceived old age to examine the construction of age identities among middle-aged women through a qualitative method.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

In this study, social constructionism and social identity theories are employed as theoretical frameworks. The theoretical framework (Figure 1) presents a visual understanding of the relationship between social constructionism and social identity theories. Social constructionism acts as the umbrella term that encompasses the social identity theory and looks at how people use their knowledge to understand the world through their daily interactions with others in the social arena where versions of knowledge are made-up or constructed and represented. Hence, all kinds of social interactions incur language, which is the focus of social constructionists. The interactions between people in their daily lives are seen as a social practice whereby different versions of knowledge are constructed. Every different construction of a particular knowledge brings or invites a different kind of action from people (Burr, 1995). From the social constructionist's perspective, age is a culturally established knowledge in a society that constructs the understanding of being young and old (Phelan, 2018). It is also known as a fluid social construct that allows people to move between different age groups throughout their lifetime (Sargent-Cox, 2017). As a social construct, age comprises a collection of culture-based beliefs and norms that are easy to access and use. The transformation of the concept of the meaning of being young and old socially constructs the identities of age (Fields *et al.*, 2018). Various definitions of what being an "elder" means and how the concept should be understood are the ways for age identities to be socially constructed (Fealy *et al.*, 2009). Age identity is constructed by social interactions that are sustained by social relations within social structures (Berger and Luckmann,1966). However, age identities can be stigmatized as they are also associated with negative sociocultural stereotypes throughout the lifespan (Jose & Meena, 2015). Thus, different age identities lead to different attitudes and actions associated with aging.

According to social identity theory, a positive identity is something that everyone strives for. In a similar context, people desire a positive group identity to secure their own self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In the context of aging, age groups are divided into young (in-group) and old age (out-group). Social identity theory explains that members of a young age group will shift from the in-group to the out-group when they become old over time. As individuals move from in-group to out-group, they develop anxiety or fear related to aging. The closer they get to the out-group, the more they fear aging. The out-group (old age group) is perceived as physically less desirable compared to the in-group (young age group) because of the negative perception of aging and fear of aging. The way in which an individual defines the out-group and understands what age to consider as an out-group will determine the anxiety associated with aging. Hence, identifying individuals' perceptions of when old age (outgroup) begins is crucial (Chonody & Teater, 2016) to understand their aging experiences and age identities. Middle-aged adults may create a positive identity of their own age group through the social identity process, but they first see themselves as not in the old age group and elevate their own group. This happens because the old age group is viewed negatively and devalued in modern society (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018). Furthermore, middle-aged adults are one step closer to becoming members of the old-age group. This increases the need for creating a distinctive identity for their own age group (Kite *et al.*, 2005). In light of this, middle-aged women's construction of age identities is essential, particularly whether they identify with their middle-aged cohort or disassociate themselves from it.
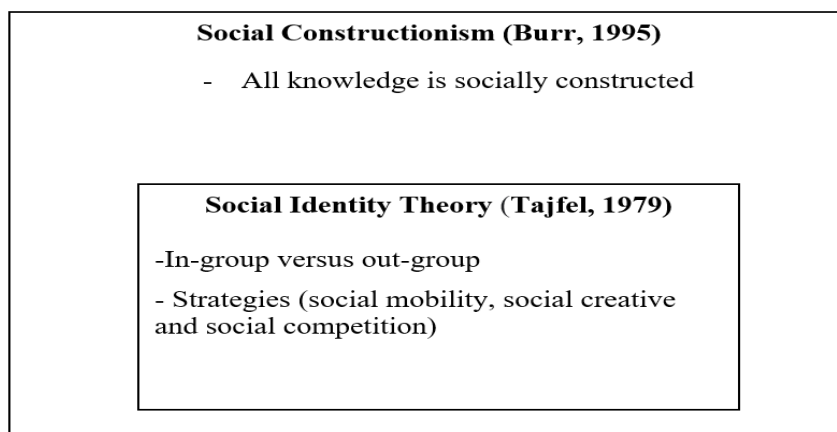

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study consists of face-to-face interviews with three women from the middle-aged cohort (between the ages of 41 and 47). Purposive sampling is employed in this study. According to Palinkas *et al.* (2015), purposeful sampling is commonly used to recruit the right respondent for the purpose of collecting information-rich data that represent an interesting phenomenon. Interviews are recorded using a tape recorder with the consent of the respondents. Several factors, including socioeconomic status, employment status, and health status, are not considered in this study. Three interview questions are adopted from the study by Macia *et al.* (2012) on *Age identity, self-rated health, and life satisfaction among older adults in Dakar, Senegal*, based on felt age (What age do you consider yourself to be?), ideal age (If you could be any age you like, what would it be?) and perceived old age (At what age do you think old age begins?).

The interview data are transcribed and coded accordingly. As a first step, thematic coding, a form of qualitative analysis, is employed. According to Dawadi (2020), thematic coding allows large data sets to be organized and analysed through the identification of themes in data. In this study, the data from the interview transcript will be coded in accordance with common themes found within the text (interview transcripts), followed by subthemes. For example, the themes of felt age are constructed as 'younger identity' and 'older identity'. And, the theme of younger identity is followed by a subtheme of social roles. Thematic coding is followed by lexical coding. A lexical component is a term that includes vocabulary, grammar, and textual structure, as defined by Fairclough (1992). During this phase, common verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs and phrases are examined within the generated themes and looked at using Van Leeuwen's analytic framework.

DATA ANALYSIS

Our study employs Van Leeuwen's representation of social actors and social actions to analyse the lexical choices, phrases, vocabulary, etc. (see Tables 1 and 2 below. Using the social actors and social actions categorizations, we analyze the respondents' choices of words when discussing their age identities.

TABLE 1: Selected categories from the Social Actor Network and their representative meanings (Van Leeuwen, 2008)

Categories of representations of Social Actors	Meaning
Functionalization	References of social actors by their actions and events like roles or occupations.
Identification	References of social actors in terms of what they are
- Classification	References of social actors by difference between a group of people within a specified society or organization.
- Relational identification	References of social actors by individual relationships, association or workplace relations.
- Physical identification	References of social actors by physical description to exclusively differentiate them from a particular background.
Exclusive/Inclusive	Include or exclude people through the ways in which they are discursively mentioned in the texts, explicitly or otherwise
Activation/Passivation	Activation refers to an actor who is active and plays a vibrant role. Passivation refers to an actor who is 'patient'/ the 'receiver' that undergoes the activity or being positioned in the receiving.

TABLE 2: Selected categories from the Social Action Network and their representative meanings (Van Leeuwen, 2008)

Categories of Representation of Social Actions	Meaning
Reactions	Personal feelings
Specified	Cognitive, affective or perceptive
Unspecified reactions	Verbs like 'react' and 'respond'
Activated Or Deactivated	Active and Passive actions
Material Action	Utilizes actions for doing
Semiotic Action	Utilizes actions for meaning
Interactive	Refers to actions via verbs that take humans as the goal
Instrumental	Utilizes the goal of actions that may be human or nonhuman or humans can be interchangeable with objects

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings based on the analysis of the interviews with three middle-aged women. The objective is to identify the construction of age identities when talking about their age-related experiences. This discussion is based on Kaufman and Elder's (2002) three main dimensions namely representations of 'felt age', 'desired age' and 'perceived old age'.

REPRESENTATIONS OF FELT AGE

Felt age refers to the age one considers oneself to be. First, the respondents express their felt age through phrases such as, *'I still feel I'm young'*, *'I never feel I'm getting old'* and *'I feel like I'm younger'*. They also express their felt age by referring to numerals such as '35 or 36', *'thirty-eight'* and *'45'*. In general, they categorize felt age into two themes: **younger identity** and **older identity**. Respondents represent younger identity through adjective nouns such as 'my *youngest child'*, *'young mother'* and *'young children'*. On the other hand, respondent 1 uses possessive pronoun such as 'my own body' to present her felt age as older identity. Then, she employs adjectives and verbs such as *'tired', 'slow'* and *'body aches'* to describe her body conditions. The following extracts show the women's construction of felt age as being younger.

- **Younger identity**

I still feel I'm young. I never feel that I'm getting old. I can say I feel like 35 or 36. The reason for it, is maybe my youngest child is still schooling, so I feel like a young mother. So, it makes me not feel like I'm 47. And I feel like I'm within 38 since sending him to school daily.

(Respondent 2)

I feel like I'm younger, at thirty-eight like that. Because I still have young children and I feel like I have to feel young for their future. Have to feel that we are young so that our mindset is not like our age, we automatically motivate ourselves to be healthier. I have 5 children. The youngest is four years old.
(Respondent 3)

When respondents represent themselves through their roles as *'young mother'* or have 'young child(ren)', they are *'functionalised'* (Van Leeuwen, 2008) in terms of an activity, something they accomplish in terms of their employment or roles (Sandaran, 2008). In this case, the representation of roles such as 'young mother' to 'young children' is a form of *'activation'*. It means the social actor (mother) is the active agent (Van Leeuwen, 2008) which highlights their duties and responsibilities to their children. In stating their role as a mother and implying the duties and responsibilities they hold, the respondent uses what Van Leeuwen (2008) states as *'relational identification'*, which also represents their personal relationship through closed nouns namely, mother and children. Middle-aged women generally hold the status as mother in a family. Hence, they must fulfill roles such as nurturing, protecting, guiding and educating their children. Overall, this draws up the subtheme of **social roles**. The things people think, do, and experience in their daily lives make them feel certain ages. Therefore, through their relational identification as young mothers, they construct their felt age as being younger than their chronological age.

In contrast, respondent 1 represents her 'older identity' by talking about body conditions such as '*tired', 'slow' and 'body aches'* (see the example of the extract below):

- **Older Identity**

If I follow my own body, I think my age is not forty-one. I feel like almost like 45 based on my body conditions when I reach the age of forty, we feel tired quickly, we easily feel tired and body aches compare to when we are still thirty, twenty. At that time, we felt fit, we did a lot of work but we felt ok and when come to forties, started to feel like we had a slow body condition.

(Respondent 1)

She represents herself as 'passive' as the 'body condition' is done onto her. According to Van Leeuwen (2008), passivation refers to social actors as receivers of an activity. The use of *'my own body'* is known as somatization in which social actors represent a thing by using their body parts (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Here she represents the body conditions by referring to her body (somatization) as it is the easiest way to describe her felt age as being older. Thus, this invokes the subtheme of **body conditions**. In sum, the women tend to perceive themselves as being younger due to their social roles or as older based on their physical/body conditions

Table 3: Representation of Felt Age

Question	Codes	Themes	Lexical/ phrases	Van Leeuwen's Categorization of Social Actors and Social Actions	Subthemes
what age do you consider yourself to be?	*'35 or 36', 'thirty-eight'*	Younger Identity	*youngest child, young mother* and *young children*	Functionalization/Relational Identification Activation	Social Roles
	'45'	Older Identity	*My own body, tired, slow and body aches*	Somatization, Passivation	Body Condition

REPRESENTATION OF DESIRED AGE

Desired age is the age at which one would most like to be. The respondents express their desired age through numerals namely, *'twenties', '23' and 'thirties'* to present their desire of being at a younger age. And they construct their desired age to one theme only: that of **younger identity** as shown in the following extracts.
- **Younger identity**

If given a chance, I want to be in my twenties. Because in the twenties, we felt our body was more energetic, we can do all kinds of work, we can do all kinds of work, we didn't easily feel tired. In the twenties, our body system was still okay and now there are a lot of problems.

(Respondent 1)

I would be happy if I can be 23 again, because at that age I started to live my own life. When I look back, <u>I was busy preparing for my life.</u> And <u>missed enjoying the moments</u> with my husband at that young age.

(Respondent 2)

If now want to be in <u>thirties</u> something. That's why I said <u>children are still young</u>.

(Respondent 3)

Next, respondents discuss different aspects of their desired younger identity. Respondent 1 compares her body health of when she was in her twenties and now. First, she employs verbs to represent her 'material actions' in twenties such as *'do all kinds of work'*. According to Van Leeuwen (2008), material action refers to the 'doing'. Second, she employs 'affective reaction' to represent her feelings in twenties namely, *'don't easily feel tired'*. Van Leeuwen (2008) explains affective reactions as one's feelings and attitudes. Next, she employs collective pronoun such as *'our body was more energetic'*, *'our body system was still okay'*. The pronoun 'our' is used for the construction of a collective identity. Respondent 1 generalizes that every individual has different body conditions during younger and middle-aged days. Therefore, this draws upon **the subtheme of retrospection**. Basically, the women compare themselves with their earlier years. It is also known as a mental process. By comparing the past with the current situation, respondent 1 desires for a younger age identity.

While respondent 2 wishes for a younger age identity by recalling her past events in her life. As a representation of why she wishes to be younger, she uses the phrase, 'missed enjoying the moments'. She expresses her regrets that she has missed enjoying her younger days, which can be explained as a semiotic action. According to Van Leeuwen (2008), semiotic action is known as an action for meaning (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Thus, this calls upon the subtheme of **reflection**. Respondent 3 constructs a younger desired age by saying *'children are still young'*. This refers to a 'relational identification' in which she represents her age identity through her kinship with her children. She constantly holds to her role as a parent to her young children. This draws upon the subtheme of **social roles**. Thus, taking care of young children seems to be one of the most significant family responsibilities for middle-aged women. In sum, the women's desired age is constructed through the themes of retrospection, social role, and regretful experiences

Table 4: Representation of Desired Age

Question	Codes	Theme	Lexical/ phrases	Van Leeuwen's Categorization of Social Actors and Social Actions	Subthemes
If you could be any age you like, what would it be?	*twenties, 23, thirties*	Younger Identity	'our body was more energetic', 'do all kinds of work', 'don't easily feel tired'	Affective reactions, Material action, Assimilation	Retrospective
			'missed enjoying the moments'	Semiotic action	Reflection
			'Children are still young'	Relational identification Activation	Social Role

REPRESENTATION OF PERCEIVED OLD AGE

Perceived old age refers to the age at which one thinks old age starts. The women mention forty, forty above and 50-55 as representing old age. They construct perceived old age into two themes: **early middle age** and **late middle age** (examples of extracts below).

- **Early Middle Age**

I start feeling the process begins when I start forty. I already <u>feel the effect</u>. When we are thirty, I don't feel anything. Starting at forty, I can <u>feel the process of aging</u>, first the <u>joint pain</u>. The first spot that I feel that I am going to aging is my joints. We easily get <u>headaches</u>. That's what I think. Once forty started, children started <u>growing up</u>. When I see <u>my children grow up</u>, I feel old and then mixed with our body condition. At that time, I think the aging process has started.

(Respondent 1)

Forty above. There is a slight feeling. We feel like, for example, our eyes, most people have started to feel <u>short-sighted</u>. Our body, it is difficult to <u>lose weight</u>. After that, if we are not active, we get <u>tired</u> quickly. If we reduce eating, body feels a little lighter right. If we gain weight, quickly feel like signs of feelings. For me, I didn't have that feeling before forty.

(Respondent 3)

There were two elements discussed by the women when it comes to perceiving old age as beginning in the early middle age. First, respondent 1 uses affective reactions (verbs) such as *'feel the effect'* and *'feel the process of aging'*. As respondent 1 is aware of age-related changes, she perceives old age as starting in early middle age. Thus, this draws upon the subtheme of

awareness of changes in body as being age-related. Furthermore, she also draws on health symptoms such as *'joint point'*, *'headache'*, *'short-sighted'*, '*difficult to lose weight'* and *'tired'*. These health symptoms are referred to as debilitating and negative affective states. As these symptoms emerge after age 40, respondents perceive early middle-aged as the beginning of old age. The respondents are represented as 'passivated' as they undergo these health symptoms. Therefore, this calls on the subtheme of **health declines**. Additionally, she perceives the start of old age as a time when her '*children grow up',* With the representations of relational identification, the respondent employed children's development to depict old age starts at early middle-aged. In this regard, this draws upon the subtheme of **grown-up children**.

- **Late Middle Age**

I think after 50 years old, aging starts because once after 50, we will start to follow the culture in the sense of dressing. For example, once my children get married, my family will expand and I cannot dress as a young lady anymore. After dressing, the behavioural change will happen. Yes at least for me, 50 to 55, I will feel the aging. Especially once I have grandchildren, I surely will feel it.

(Respondent 2)

Respondent 2 constructs perceived old age as being late middle-aged. She discussed two different aspects in relation to her perceptions of the start of old age First, she highlights *'culture in the sense of dressing'*. Culture is a form of classification that exists in society. Culture reflects the values of a particular community. According to respondent 2, culture influences her sense of dressing after she turns 50. Hence, this calls on **cultural values**. Furthermore, the respondent mentions '*children get married', 'my family will expand' and 'have grandchild'*. Using relational identification, she describes how the changes in her personal relationships make her feel old, which she perceives as starting in late middle age. This draws upon **family transitions**. Overall, the women perceive the start of old age as early middle age through the themes of awareness of changes, declining health and grown-up children. Conversely, women also construct old age as starting in late middle age, by drawing on cultural values of how an old person should behave, dress, etc. as well as the expansion of her family members.

Table 5: Representation of Perceived Old Age

Question	Codes	Themes	Lexical/ phrases	Van Leeuwen's Categorization of Social Actors and Social Actions	Subthemes
At what age do you think old age begins?	*forty, forty above,*	Early Middle-Aged	*'feel the effect', 'feel the process of aging'*	Affective Reaction	Awareness of age-related changes
			'joint point, difficult to lose weight and tired'	Affective Reaction, Passivation	Health declining
			my children grow up'	Relation Identification	Growing Up Children
	50-55 years	Late Middle-Aged	*'Culture in the sense of dressing'*	Classification	Culture Values
			'children get married', 'family will expand', 'have grandchildren'	Relation Identification	Family Transitions

DISCUSSION

This study identifies several themes related to the dimensions of age identities, namely felt age, desired age and perceived old age. The findings show that the women's felt ages do not correlate with their chronological ages. Instead, their felt age is influenced by factors such as their social roles and body conditions. For the concept of felt age, respondents construct both younger and older identities. According to Rozario & Derienzis (2009), individuals construct various age identities depending on their experiences and understanding of age. The women refer to their social roles as 'young mothers' with 'young children' when they construct their felt age as being younger than their chronological age. Age identities are highly associated with individuals' age-related roles (Coupland *et al*., 1991), social roles and life situations (Riley *et al*., 1988). In this regard, the women attribute their feeling of a younger self to their roles as mothers. As Mayer (2012) explains, individuals tend to categorize themselves into specific roles in order to find meaning and purpose in life. Therefore, roles come with standards and expectations that assist one's behaviour. For middle-aged women, motherhood is the most active role that acts as their personal and social identity as well. As primary caregivers, middle-aged women actively contribute to the growth and development of their children. Motherhood comes with the expectation that one should be active and dynamic. Being active in motherhood also means being younger than one's chronological age. Similarly, Logan *et al*. (1992) reveal that parents with young children tend to feel younger due to their involvement in their children's education. Therefore, it is common for women to feel younger due to their social/gender roles of being mothers,

especially to young children. However, as women age, their role as mothers tends to be passive as children grow up and leave home. This is known as role exits (Mancini, 1975). Consequently, they may experience a different age identity, i.e.an older identity.

By contrast, when the women construct their felt age as older than their chronological age, they highlight the theme of body conditions, such as '*my own body', 'tired', 'slow' and 'body aches'*. Coupland *et al.* (1991) explain that there is a strong relation between age identities and health. The women's perceptions about the changes in their body condition and health make them feel older. Westerhof *et al.* (2014) and Macia *et al.* (2012) explain that poor health leads to older subjective age. Similarly, Furstenberg (1989), points out that as individuals begin to display old-age-related characteristics, they see themselves as old. Additionally, Montepare (2014) asserts that women's older age identities and negative body views are strongly linked. In our findings, the respondent believes that her physical conditions are related to aging, so she feels older than she actually is. According to Barret (2003), older age identities signify a low sense of control over one's health. Similarly, our study finds that respondents become passive with regard to their physical health. In other words, the onset of health problems during middle age seems to make them pessimistic about older age. This may affect the individuals' active health behaviours in the long run, as they believe illness is a normal part of aging.

In terms of desired age, all three women desire to be younger than their chronological age. In fact, they want to be younger than their felt age. Kaufman and Elder (2002) state that individuals often yearn to go back to their twenties or even their teens for many reasons. In our study, one respondent relates to the retrospective theme as she constructs her desired age as being younger than her chronological age with phrases such as her younger body, and younger days, e.g., '*our body was more energetic'*, '*do all kinds of work'* and '*don't easily feel tired'*. Basically, she compares her current level of energy and body conditions with her former, younger self. Sherman (1994) describes retrospective as comparing one's current self to one's past self, especially in terms of health, physical strength, and appearance. Based on this comparison, it appears that the respondent does not feel comfortable with her current age, resulting in a low degree of acceptance of aging. She also refers to the theme of reflection for constructing a younger desired age, with phrases such as '*missed enjoying the moments'*. Through reflection, she reflects on her younger age with regrets about what she could have done and what she has missed. Both retrospection and reflection are significant mental processes that promote self-awareness among individuals.

For the concept of perceived old age, they construct two categories, i.e., early middle age and late middle age. Middle age is seen as the start of old age rather than the old age cohort. The women relate to the themes of awareness of age-related changes, health declines and grownup children as the start of old age in their middle age. For the theme of awareness of age-related changes, they employ phrases such as '*feel the effect'* and '*feel the process of aging'*. Next, with phrases such as '*joint pain, difficult to lose weight and tired'*, they draw on the theme of health decline. Their self-perception of being in poor health causes them to assume that old age begins at middle age. Then, for the theme of 'grown up children', they use phrases such as '*my children grow up'* which according to Lachman & James (1997), may mark the beginning of middle age for adults. However, our study, believes that having grown-up children and/with poor body conditions, reflects the beginning of old age.

The women refer to the themes of cultural values and family transitions when perceiving the start of old age. One respondent sees dressing in accordance with one's culture, especially once one reaches 50 as a deciding factor of old age, which she needs to adhere to. Women's social values are influenced by their culture in many ways (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001). In this sense, cultural identity influences one's age identity. Family transitions such as children getting married or having grandchildren is another theme that defines the start of old age, according to our respondent. Subramanian (2019) concurs that having married children and grandchildren is associated with the feeling of becoming old. As Sherman (1994) points out, everyone perceives old age differently, not only because of society's definition of the term 'old' but also because of their life experiences. In this respect, respondents believe old age starts at middle age based on their life courses such as age-related awareness, a decline in health, having grown-up children, cultural values and expansion of the family. In sum, our findings show that the perception of old age starts when women are still in their middle age, and the age identity they draw on in turn affects how their view aging, whether as a negative or positive experience. If negative age identities persist, this could make the women feel even older than their chronological of when they reach sixty and above. As a result, the women may perceive their aging process as being beyond their control which could eventually lead to them feeling helpless, vulnerable and victimised in their own aging process.

CONCLUSION

In this preliminary study, we set out to examine middle-aged women's age identities and the associated factors. Our findings show that middle-aged women perceive and understand their age based on their roles, health, life experiences and life events. Thus, social and cultural environments play such a critical role in women's self-perception of age (age identities). An individual's subjective experiences of aging are reflected in their age identities, especially in the dimensions of felt age and desired age. Their role occupancy, role transitions and role exit impact their age identities. Among middle-aged women, motherhood and caregiver are significant role identities. Therefore, their active role in motherhood serves as a justification for their age identities. Next, health is also an influencing factor for women's subjective aging experience. Thus, a positive state of health correlates with youth, whereas a negative state of health correlates with old age. And the perception of women's state of health is subjective according to individuals. Such as, certain health issues are acceptable for some but not for others. Life events and experiences impact age-related thoughts and make individuals feel certain age as well. Adopting different age group identities is common for middle-aged adults to feel better about themselves, especially in the transition from the young cohort to the middle-aged cohort. Understanding the age identities of middle-aged women and the associated factors is crucial for the planning of programs and policies such as healthy aging and active aging. Malaysia's current program of Active Aging mainly targets the older adult cohort but targeting also the middle-aged cohort would really mean preparing for a future aging population, to ensure better aging experiences for women who are currently in the middle-aged cohort.

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