

# ONLINE DATING IN MIDDLE AND LATER LIFE

## *Gendered Expectations and Experiences*

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### Introduction

*The previous article focused on college students' dating experiences. This one focuses on middle-aged and older adults' experiences with dating. For college students, there is a ready-made pool of eligible dating partners in classes, athletic events, parties, and other venues where there are many people of similar age. However, the pool of suitable dating partners available to middle-aged and older adults may be more difficult to access, so many are turning to high-tech dating. This article looks at the online dating experiences of 18 adults (between the ages of 53 and 74)—along with information from dating “coaches” who specialize in helping people in middle and later life be more successful in dating. Do adult daters have different expectations and experiences than younger daters? Do women and men in the older age range differ in their expectations? The answers to these questions may surprise you.*

The popularity of online dating has surged across age groups since its emergence nearly two decades ago (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012); however, research on this phenomenon tends to focus on young to middle-aged adults (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008; Whitty, 2008). Limited attention is given to aging adults—a

group often stereotyped as lacking interest in intimate, particularly sexual, relationships (Calasanti, 2007). Contrasting with this image, many unmarried older adults enjoy dating and desire companionship (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991; Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986). Reflecting this desire—and the dating challenges that aging adults face—use of the Internet to meet

potential partners appears to increase with age (Stephure, Boon, MacKinnon, & Deveau, 2009). Online dating is a strategy employed by a small, but growing, segment of the aging population, evidenced by the abundant advertisements for 50-plus dating sites such as OurTime.com and SeniorPeopleMeet.com. Approximately 6 percent of 50 to 64 year olds and 3 percent of adults over 65 tried online dating as of 2005 (Madden & Lenhart, 2006), with research by the industry pointing to a recent uptick among older adults. EHarmony.com reports that between 2005 and 2010 online dating sites became the most common way for adults over age 50 to meet marital partners (Gonzaga, 2010), while Match.com (2010) finds that 50 and over is their fastest growing demographic—an increasing segment of the single population (Cooney & Dunne, 2001).

Our study, based on interviews with 18 middle-aged and older adults involved in online dating and 2 online romance coaches, provides insight into intimate relationships deriving from two related intersections: (a) gender and aging and (b) gender and age inequality.

### DATING AT THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND AGING

Middle-aged and older adults—simply by virtue of their age—are likely to have experienced long-term, intimate relationships that affect, in gendered ways, reentry into the dating market. Becoming single, through divorce or widowhood, is an emotionally challenging experience (Barrett, 2000; Kitson, Babri, Roach, & Placidi, 1989; Williams & Umberson, 2004) that can hamper future relationship formation (Lampard & Peggs, 2007; Moorman, Booth, & Fingerma, 2006; Talbot, 1998). However, these relationship transitions and their emotional impacts are conditioned by gender. Both women and men face higher risk of late life divorce than did earlier cohorts, but widowhood—a transition much more likely among women (Cooney & Dunne, 2001)—is associated with higher levels of chronic stress than is divorce (Pudrovskaya, Schieman, & Carr, 2006). Whether

experiencing divorce or widowhood, men exhibit greater increases in depression than women; however, they recover at a faster rate (Costa, Herbst, McCrae, & Siegler, 2000; Lee, DeMaris, Bavin, & Sullivan, 2001; Umberson, Wortman, & Kessler, 1992). This pattern may derive from women's role as emotion managers, leading mothers to provide more emotional support to adult children following spousal death than do fathers (Ha, Carr, Utz, & Nesse, 2006) and subsequently bottle up their own emotions and desires for new partners. Divorced women also experience higher levels of strain with being single than do divorced men, perhaps a result of viewing marital loss as a threat to gender identity (Pudrovskaya et al., 2006). In contrast with women, recently single men experience an increase in standard of living (Peterson, 1996) and may have others caring for them, facilitating a quicker adaptation to singlehood.

Although timetables may vary by gender, many older adults eventually explore new relationships (Davidson, 2001). Yet finding a suitable partner is challenging for aging adults, who have smaller and more gender homophilous social networks than younger adults (Ajrouch, Blandon, & Antonucci, 2005; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001) and who are less satisfied with traditional means of meeting partners, such as frequenting bars or night clubs (Stephure et al., 2009). Their dating opportunities also are limited in gender-specific ways. Women's opportunities for repartnering are dramatically reduced by the demography of aging: Not only do older women outnumber men, but older men also are more likely to be married (Kinsella & He, 2009). Men's social networks present limitations, as single older men's networks are smaller than those of single older women (Ajrouch, Antonucci, & Janevic, 2001), and retirement significantly shrinks men's non-spousal interactions (Szinovac, DeViney, & Davey, 2001). Because wives tend to manage couples' friendship networks, men's social contact following marital loss diminishes (Davidson, 2004; Davidson, Daly, & Arber, 2003). These barriers may attract older men and women to online dating as a means of expanding the pool of eligibles. This argument is consistent with research finding that individuals facing limited

dating markets are most likely to turn to online dating, as is the case for divorced adults, who want to move outside their marital-based networks in seeking new partners (Sautter, Tipett, & Morgan, 2010), and middle-aged adults, who find that most heterosexuals in their age group are currently partnered (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012).

Online dating may appeal to women as a way to exert more control over the process, compared with traditional methods through which they met partners in earlier life. When today's aging adults were teenagers and young adults, the prevailing dating system gave more control to men: They asked women out on dates, made plans for the evening, picked women up in their cars, and paid any costs—often creating expectations of women's reciprocation with sexual favors (Bailey, 1988). This dating system underwent changes with the feminist movement in the latter half of the 20th century, giving women greater control. Exerting control over the process may be further enhanced in the online environment, where feelings of anonymity reduce vulnerability tied to initiating contact in person (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004). Although men are the primary initiators of contact in both environments, studies reveal high levels of initiation of relationships by women in the online setting. One early study of online dating reports that more than a quarter of women initiated contact with at least 100 men (Scharlott & Christ, 1995), and more recent research shows that more than 20 percent of initial communication on an online dating site consisted of women contacting men (Fiore, Taylor, Zhong, Mendelsohn, & Cheshire, 2010). However, these studies, which rely on cross-sectional data, do not account for possible selection effects. Women choosing to use online dating websites may be more proactive than others in their searches for romantic partners. It also is plausible that the structure of online dating itself facilitates women's exercise of greater control over the dating process, with differences particularly pronounced for middle-aged and older women who were socialized in earlier life stages to more passive roles in dating.

Gendered experiences in prior intimate relationships also shape orientations to new partnerships. Women may wish to “undo” (Risman, 2009) or

“redo” (West & Zimmerman, 2009) traditional scripts by seeking more egalitarian future partnerships. Many widows report a degree of freedom accompanying the loss of responsibility for the emotional or physical well-being of their husbands, an experience activating a gendered version of selfishness that allows women to privilege their own desires (Davidson, 2001). These women are reluctant to relinquish their autonomy by reestablishing a traditional relationship. In comparison, many older men, especially those with more traditional attitudes toward marriage, may wish to replicate gender relations of their past relationships, seeking a partner soon after becoming single to assist with household chores (Bennett, Hughes, & Smith, 2003). However, widowers' faster repartnering also may stem from desire for emotional support and companionship, resources that men are less likely than women to receive from friends (Carr, 2004).

#### **Dating at the Intersection of Gender and Age Inequality**

Gender shapes experiences with dating through its intersection with not only the accumulation with age of experiences in intimate relationships but also age inequality. The decline of status with age affects both genders, but aging produces greater losses of symbolic and material resources for women than men—a pattern produced by dominant constructions of feminine beauty around youth and women's weaker socioeconomic position contributing to financial dependence on men (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Biggs, 2004; Sontag, 1979). The intersection of age and gender inequality is reflected in the dating market. Across the life course, men emphasize attractiveness and prefer younger women (Fisman, Ivengar, Kamenica, & Simonson, 2006; Hayes, 1995; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994). Analysis of online dating profiles shows that men seek increasingly age-discrepant relationships as they age (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009), although other research suggests limits to the age gaps. A study of online daters reports that older men prefer women within 10 years of their age (Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010b). In contrast, women dating online value intelligence and socioeconomic potential over

attractiveness (Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010a) and prefer men their own age or older—though they do seek slightly younger men in late life (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009). Age-related shifts in women's and men's dating preferences may reflect the gendered nature of health, longevity, and care work. Men's shorter life expectancies and higher prevalence of heart disease and cancer (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2010) may contribute to older men's preferences for youthful partners who could offer care and assistance and women's preferences for younger partners with whom they can enjoy active lifestyles and reduced risk of demanding caregiving roles.

Online daters also are concerned about their own self-presentation, particularly centering on age, one of the main characteristics used in running profile searches. They understand that others will use cues in their pictures and descriptions to evaluate their age and assess their desirability (Lawson & Leck, 2006). The devaluation of older adults raises issues of online daters' presentation of chronological age and construction of age identities in their profiles and e-mail exchanges, a negotiation involving tension between authenticity and social approval. Some aging adults may feel little pressure to either mask their chronological age or present a more youthful identity, stemming from an age-related sense of freedom to be authentic, as well as the greater importance of trust and communication than desire in older adults' relationships (Riggs & Turner, 1999). However, many online daters in middle and later life explain that underreporting their own age is crucial (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010). This strategy may not only be a pragmatic response to the realities of dating but also present a profile more consistent with older adults' self-images. As adults age, they report feeling increasingly younger than their actual chronological age (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Kotter-Grühn, & Smith, 2008). Tension between a youthful mind and aging body leads many older adults to protect their sense of self by constructing a youthful identity (Biggs, 1997). Given preferences among aging adults for partners who are "not old," both women and men have incentives to construct profiles highlighting their youth.

In addition to portraying their age in socially acceptable ways, men and women also must "do gender" so that others perusing their profile see them as meeting ideals of heterosexual femininity and masculinity (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Femininity for older women centers on appearance, emphasizing attractiveness and health maintained through physical activity (Calasanti, 2005). To establish the youthful femininity that men will find desirable, women are likely to emphasize their looks and sexuality in profiles. Images of youthful masculinity are frequently associated with dominance in the workplace and consumerism (Calasanti & King, 2007). Older men are likely to adopt language or use pictures in their profiles emphasizing manhood acts demonstrating their masculine power—and establishing them as desirable partners for women (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Because creating an appealing profile requires balancing authenticity and attractiveness (Whitty, 2007), middle-aged and older adults may create profiles that call attention to the ideals of youthful femininity or masculinity that they embody while concealing qualities that might make them seem old.

## METHOD

Men and women over 50 years of age who previously or currently used online dating websites were recruited through e-mails on listservs for older adult organizations, presentations at older adult group meetings, and referral by personal contacts. Participants were asked to explain how and why they became involved in online dating, the process of creating their profiles, and what dating experiences they had as a result of online searches. Each participant also was asked to provide his or her dating site profile, and 10 participants complied with this request. Additionally, 2 romance coaches who specialized in working with online daters were interviewed to supplement the research. These interviews covered the experiences of the coaches' middle-aged and older clients, their opinions and observations of online dating in later life, and their overall process of coaching online daters.

The total sample consisted of 20 adults—8 men and 10 women who were online daters between the

ages of 53 and 74 at the time of the interview and 2 romance coaches, one in her 30s and the other in her 60s. All respondents were white, middle-class, heterosexual adults. Many of the participants held advanced degrees, and all but one were college educated. Of the online daters, nine participants were divorced, five were widowed, three had experienced both divorce and widowhood, and one was never married. Of the previously married participants, relationship transitions followed expected gender patterns: Half the women but only slightly more than a third of the men were widowed, and 50 percent of the women and almost 90 percent of men were divorced. A few participants tried free online dating sites, but most relied on widely advertised, for-pay websites. Most participants online dated within the last 18 months or were currently using online dating sites, and the two women and one man who had not been active in online dating recently were married to a partner they met online. The sample is limited with regard to sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic diversity. However, with regard to socioeconomic status, the sample is representative of the population of older adult Internet users (Fox, 2004).

The tape-recorded and transcribed interviews were analyzed using grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## RESULTS

Our analysis revealed that gender intersected with both aging and age inequality to condition the expectations and experiences of older online daters. We discuss five aspects of online dating that were shaped by these intersections: legacy of past relationships, disappointment in dating scenes, aspirations for intimacy, images of ideal partners, and presentation of youthful personae.

### Legacy of Past Relationships: Transitions and Time

Transitioning to singlehood, whether due to divorce or widowhood, required adaptation; however, differences in their emotional aftermath had

implications for dating. This distinction was summarized by Linda, a 61-year-old widow dating a divorcé: "Divorce is a rejection. With death you can get angry and all that, but you weren't rejected." She reflected on how his "baggage" following the divorce made him skeptical of their relationship. A history of divorce brought feelings of insecurity into new experiences, whereas widowhood presented its own set of challenges, including happy memories and loving emotions that lingered long after entering new relationships—and that divorced partners might not understand. Betty, a 71-year-old widow who was dating a divorcé, shared her observation: "That's the difference between a divorced man and a widow. He threw all the bitch's pictures in the garbage, and I still have mine."

Whether they lost their spouse through divorce or widowhood, women in the sample experienced a longer transition period, more than four years on average compared with less than two for men, following the end of their marriage—grieving, taking time to be alone, and taking care of their families—before considering new relationships. Grief was particularly salient for widows, such as Mary, 67, who said the process of getting over her husband's death was "the hardest thing that I ever did in my life. And I didn't think I was going to make it there for awhile. It took a couple of years to get back to where I felt like I was a person again." Linda, 61, also reflected on difficulty with this transition:

I had not been in a relationship for a long time after my husband died, but I was still married to him, there was still that feeling. It's just very hard for me because I still feel like I'm a couple, but I'm not.

Widows occasionally had to delay dealing with their own feelings or looking for new romantic partners because of family obligations like caring for children or aging parents. Betty, 71, faced this responsibility after her husband's death: "My children were grieving so terribly that I almost had to put the cap on my own grief because I was so worried about them." Divorced women also moved slower than men into the dating market, but their reasons centered more on a desire for personal time. Susan, a 57-year-old divorcée, said,



“And the first year I did not date at all, not a cup of coffee, nothing. I just wanted to get used to being alone, and I just wasn’t interested.”

While women emphasized emotional recovery and delay of dating following marital loss, men focused their discussions on readiness for new relationships. Matthew, a 57-year-old widower, exemplified this position: “After about six months I finally got over the grief and the pain and taking the medication, then I started thinking, ‘What’s my option?’” Although briefly recognizing difficulty with his wife’s death, he felt a need to move on and look for potential partners. The male participants not only were ready to date relatively soon after marital loss but also assumed they would quickly find a new partner. James, 54, said, “When I first got divorced I thought I’d be remarried in like two or three years.”

Men tended to view online dating as a way to hasten their return to dating. Unlike traditional methods of meeting partners, for example, activating one’s social networks, online dating allows the search for a partner to begin as soon as one’s profile is posted. Reflecting the sense of haste with which some men approached online dating, Frank, 61, explained that he liked to move quickly to meeting women in person:

When I see photos I like, and we exchange a couple of e-mails, and we have similar interests like running, dancing, and traveling, and I can tell one phone conversation I like her voice, she likes mine—why waste any time? Let’s meet!

Contrasting with men’s emphasis on the efficiency of online dating, women viewed this method as a way to ease into the idea of new relationships. Posting a profile provided them the opportunity to interact with others to whatever extent they wished and develop relationships at a comfortable pace, without greater pressures that may exist in face-to-face encounters. William, 66, communicated back-and-forth with a woman for a number of months while she debated her willingness to date. He explained, “She just lost her husband a year ago and she’s dealing with grief. And she’s not really ready to meet anybody, but she likes to talk and I make her laugh.” This

alternative was especially attractive to women who were not necessarily ready to enter into a relationship due to still fragile feelings, as they could explore their potential interest in new partners by looking at profiles and talking to others online. William continued, “Just a few days ago she asked if she could have my phone number so we could talk in person. In the same message she said that maybe in a few months she’d be actually ready to meet people.”

### **Disappointment in Dating Scenes: Social Networks, Bars, and Church**

Aging adults seeking intimate relationships found customary meeting places to be geared toward younger adults. Richard, 71, described the options for older adults as limited by a combination of age norms for social activities and shrinking social networks:

Social clubs, church, bars, that’s it. There is no other—or through friends. But other than that, there would be no other way to meet people. Older people don’t go to bars much. That’s a younger person’s thing. They don’t have too many friends because their friends are dying out. So, what’s left? Social clubs and church. Now church is rather restrictive.

Limited options were encountered by women and men; however, the source of their restrictions varied by gender. Older men spoke about limitations imposed by paid work roles, including the loss of these roles. James, a retired 54-year-old, explained, “If I was still in a high profile position—and this is not just me but any man that’s in a high profile position—you’re meeting so many women.” However, employed men noted barriers to meeting women in the workplace stemming from their status. Robert, who was 74 and working full-time, stated, “My staff wouldn’t dare to introduce me to anybody because they are afraid there are repercussions if it doesn’t work.” He also noted that active pursuit of a coworker would be negatively viewed: “Professionally, I also am sitting on several committees and chair several committees, and it would be very bad for me hitting on anybody on there.”

Other locations also yielded few romantic prospects for men. Describing his experience at bars, Frank, 61, explained that “you always hear women say they get tired of the bar scene. And that’s totally understandable. I think guys are more likely to still go out to the bars. The women—we always wondered where they are.” In contrast, women were present in church—the other social setting mentioned by men—but either they were unavailable or common courtesy seemed to prevent the expression of romantic interest. As John, 53, said,

Where are you going to meet a somewhat quality person? My mother said, “Meet them at church.” But they’re all married. There was one decent looking woman at church that was single and my age, and I’d go sit close, but you don’t want to get hit on at church.

QU: wf?

Men viewed online dating as a means of expanding their limited options.

As William, 66, explained,

You know there’s always the possibility of meeting somebody, which you don’t really have if you’re in a smallish area. It seems like it’s easier to try to meet somebody using the online service than it is just go to different places and run into them in person.

Peter, 72, said he started online dating to “cover a broader range of possibilities” and because “it gave you an entrée to talk to ladies that you would never meet otherwise. If you were looking for someone my age to date, pretty slim pickings.”

Older women also sought to expand their options through online dating. However, women were motivated by different barriers—friendship norms that limited the pool of eligible partners and disadvantages they faced in competing with younger women. Women, but not men, mentioned discomfort in pursuing ex-partners of their friends. Betty, 71, said about dating in her old neighborhood, “About all that’s available down there is the occasional husband whose wife has died. And I really would prefer not to date a dead friend’s husband—too much history and too much talk.” Women felt further constrained by

the availability of younger women—a barrier to dating that was not mentioned by the men in the sample. Describing an experience shortly following her divorce, Cindy, 53, said,

So here I am, 47 years old, freezing cold, waiting in line to get in a bar. And I thought, “What am I doing?” And we get in there and I’m competing with girls that are 25. It was so depressing to me.

Women talked about feeling reluctant to initiate relationships face-to-face, given gendered norms around dating and sexual expression. Barbara, a romance coach, argued that online dating has “leveled the playing field for women” by making it “perfectly okay online for women to make the first move.” Consistent with this observation, women did occasionally mention contacting men first on seeing their profiles. However, most women tended to make first contact as a last resort. As Claire, 53, explained: “I almost never contacted people. When I would be bored and deciding nothing was happening, occasionally I would contact people. But, I had enough things happening that I wasn’t feeling like I had to do that very much.”

Not only were women and men motivated to try online dating by different barriers encountered in traditional settings for meeting partners, but they also were encouraged by different parties to try this novel strategy. Consistent with the salience of the workplace in men’s accounts of prior dating experiences and friendships networks in women’s accounts, men were often led to online dating by work colleagues, whereas women were typically encouraged by friends or family. Robert, 74, became interested in online dating through talking with the caterer his business used:

He said, “I want you to meet my new bride; I met her on eHarmony and we are getting married in three months.” He was egging me on, and by the time he left, I said, “Alright, I’m going to risk that \$90 it costs,” and I signed up.

In comparison, Betty, 71, described how her interest in online dating emerged when having drinks with her neighbors one evening:

They were so cute and lovey-dovey, and they're in their sixties. And this lady looked at me, and she said, "You know, we've just gotten married. We met on the J-Net." Then they heard about me, and they said, "Oh, you ought to get on the Senior Friends Finder."

### Aspirations for Intimacy: Companionship, Marriage, and Love

Gender shaped expectations for online dating, with many women hoping to form relationships different from their previous ones. Women were more likely than men to express disinterest in (re)marriage, with four specifically stating that they had no desire to marry. Kathleen, 55, said when talking about her postdivorce life, "After I got divorced, I built a house that I was never going to leave. I knew I was never getting married again." Some women's desire to avoid the commitment of marriage stemmed from the new sense of freedom experienced after divorce or widowhood. As explained by Patricia, a romance coach,

They wanted to have kids. They've had them. The kids are maybe at least in college or completely out of the nest at that point, and they're going through having this sort of second or third wave of freedom and liberty with their lives.

For some women, the end of their prior marriage had liberated them from caregiving responsibilities, a burden they hoped to avoid in subsequent relationships. Mary, a 67-year-old widow, explained, "I took care of an invalid husband for eight long years. I can't handle that again. I know it would kill me." Nancy, 68, talked about screening men's health online, saying that it was "pretty easy because when they tell you what kind of food they like and what kind of exercise they *don't do*. You look for what you *don't see*. You can tell the couch potatoes."

Even women who had not been caregivers often wished to avoid constraining marital roles. Betty, 71, explains how she enjoys her relationship with a man she met online because she does not have to look after him daily:

I love the fact that I don't live with him 7 days a week. I don't want to. I don't want somebody asking me 7 days what's for lunch. Or what's for dinner. I did that for 46 years—I don't want to do it.

Although less common, some women had cared for their former husbands by being the primary breadwinner. Kathleen, 55, explained that she did not plan to repeat this arrangement: "I had supported one husband for 16 years and I wasn't going to support another one. Don't even think about it."

In contrast with women who tended to seek intimacy and companionship but not (re)marriage, men sought more commitment from new partners, whom they viewed as sources of instrumental and emotional support. Richard, 70, mentioned that a woman he dated refused to cook for him, and, when asked if he cared whether a partner shared the housework, he explained,

Well, it would be nice. I did the laundry the other day. I did the whites, and then I did the colors. From about 10 o'clock in the morning till 5 o'clock in the afternoon, my day was laundry. I did two loads. I ironed. I hung up. Complete laundry day. And it would be helpful if somebody would do some of that.

Men's greater proclivity to marriage led them to mention love more often than women. Rather than seeking friendship, as did many women, men sought relationships that could lead to stronger emotional bonds. Reflecting men's emphasis on love and marriage, Frank, 61, said,

If you had the love of your life, and you lost them, and your soul mate is gone, and you've raised your family, and yet you're still lonely, and you still have sexual desires. . . . I get it. There's people that want friends with benefits. That's fine. I'm still looking for my soul mate. The love of my life. I'm not giving up that hope. That's why I'm online.

Referring to relationship alternatives, Frank reiterated his preference for marriage: "I've never cohabited. I'm not going to say that I never will, but if I'm in love then I'm going to propose." This proclivity



was noted by Barbara, a romance coach, who said, “Men who’ve been married, whether they’re widowed or divorced, tend to like being married, and they tend to move toward getting married again real quick.” For men, online dating represented an efficient means of seeking wives to provide the daily support, both instrumental and emotional, they expected.

### **Images of Ideal Partners: Appearance, Resources, and Youth**

Gendered preferences for new relationships intersected with age inequality to shape aging adults’ conceptions of ideal partners. Reflecting our culture’s negative view of aging, both women and men sought partners either their own age or younger. Robert, 74, detailed the age range listed on his profile: “I put down 55 to 75, and I had one or two in the 70s, but most in the 55 to 65 age group. Closer to 60, but that might be my own choice.” In addition to screening on chronological age, Robert eliminated women whose profiles noted hobbies associated with older adults: “for example, somebody who had their major entertainment was bingo and gardening.” Men also viewed women involved in online dating as favoring younger men. Richard, 70, explained he usually dates women between 68 and 72 because “you don’t find many older women asking for anybody older. Those involved in it don’t want anybody much older than 70, unless they’re up in age.” Reflecting this preference, Valerie, 67, said, “I prefer someone younger than me. I guess is that what they call ‘cougars?’ I prefer somebody in their 50s.”

Youth was valued by both genders, but it held different meanings for men and women. For men, younger partners signified masculine success in attracting women who meet our culture’s youthful standards of feminine beauty. The romance coaches reiterated men’s intertwined preferences for attractive and younger women. Patricia recounted a conversation with one of her male clients who said, “I don’t want to date women my own age. All the women I see look like hags.” She also observed that some of her clients were interested in learning how young of

women they could attract. Consistent with coaches’ observations, all men in the sample emphasized the importance of physical attractiveness, with many describing the women they sought as having thin, youthful body types. John, 53, noted physical appearance when assessing women’s online profiles: “I won’t say it was a checklist, but it is. See if you have something in common with anybody—and, I mean, looks count.” Peter, 72, echoed this view:

From a physical standpoint, I would definitely not be interested in someone that was, they use the terms “slim,” “full-bodied,” or the word “fat” wouldn’t be used. But in other words, “heavy.” I would not be interested in anybody that’s “heavy.”

Women also wanted youthful partners, but their reasons centered less on physical attractiveness than abilities. While younger partners represented for men success at attracting physically desirable women, they signified for women assurance of an active lifestyle—and an insurance against caregiving. Many women expressed a desire for men who could “keep up” with their high levels of social and physical activity. As Valerie, 67, explains,

When I meet guys that are near my age, they’re very old in their ways. And I’m very energetic, because I go dancing a couple times a week, I run four miles a day, and I’m real athletic and healthy. So I’m looking for someone that can be on my athletic level.

For a similar reason, Jennifer, a 57-year-old divorcée, ended a relationship with an older man she met online:

He kept saying, “I don’t know why you have a problem with the age difference,” and I said, “Let’s think about down the road.” When I’m 78—and my mom at age 78 traveled, she was very active—he’s going to be 90. And I said, “I still want to travel when I retire, I want to be very active, and I want my spouse to be that way too.” I just see that age difference becoming a bigger problem as we would both get older. Men usually die sooner than women anyway, and now he’s got a 12 year head-start on me.

Women also emphasized intelligence and communication skills in a partner, themes that rarely arose in interviews with men. They used dating prospects' profiles and e-mails as indicators of these characteristics. Describing these materials as "like a resume," Claire, 53, explained that "it's hard to communicate with somebody who can't communicate in writing. I like to talk about books and films and art, and if they can't write, it's hard for them to express themselves." Kathleen, 55, also mentioned,

A lot of the profiles you read, it's like, oh my God, did they even graduate from high school? And I hate to sound elitist or tacky about that, but if this is the way you write on your profile. (...)

Valerie, 67, echoed this sentiment of seeking men who highlighted their intelligence:

Maybe it's the teacher in me, but I like to look at their sentence structure and see if they can write a good sentence. I also look at their profile to see if they have a college education. That's important to me.

### **Presentation of a Youthful Persona: Physical Attractiveness, Success, and Vigor**

Women's and men's preferences for younger partners led to the cultivation of youthful personae in their own online profiles and e-mail exchanges. Some participants' strategies focused on chronological age, adjusting birthdates on their profiles to increase their appeal. As Mary, 67, said,

I was very honest about my age, and I got very few responses at first. Then I lied a little bit, and I got a lot more responses. Now, sometimes you have to, because most people, they just look at that number.

Mary's profile lists her age as 57—10 years younger than her actual age. Mary was the only participant admitting to altering her chronological age, but others told stories of meeting people who misrepresented their age. For example, Jennifer, 57, said of a man she met online:

He goes, "Well, I have to be honest about something. I'm older than what I said I was." He actually was 3

years older than he already had shown himself to be, so that made him definitely way too old for me.

This strategy of changing chronological age allowed emphasizing other characteristics as more accurate indicators of age, such as health or behaviors. For example, the man who lied about his chronological age to Jennifer claimed that his age did not correspond with his level of vitality. In her recounting of the story, she quotes him as saying that he lied "because I really take care of myself and I'm in really good shape, and so I don't want to be with an old person."

A related strategy involved emphasizing how old they felt—their subjective age or age identity. Linda, 61, explained, "It's really hard for us, because, the baby boomers, we've always been the young ones. And you don't feel old." Thus most women and men listed their true age, but created an age identity that matched their inner youthfulness through descriptions in their profiles. The use of this strategy varied by gender, mirroring the images of ideal partners sought by women and men. Women created youthful images of themselves by stressing femininity through sociality and physical attractiveness. In Valerie's, 67, "about me and who I am looking for" section of the profile, she described, "My friends tell me that I have a lot of energy. I am getting bored being alone and am looking for some fun in my life." Her website included photographs of herself on trips and playing with her dogs, emphasizing her liveliness. Creating a similarly youthful, playful image, Cindy's, 53, profile stated that "Most people think I was a cheerleader. I play a lot of tennis and try to stay fit. I've been told I have nice legs and pretty eyes, but that's for you to decide!" Jennifer's, 57, long list of activities and interests, including hiking, roller coasters, and festivals, was followed by "From the various interests I have listed, you can see I am a very active person." These women all included close-up photographs of their faces as well as full-body shots highlighting their trim figures.

Men also constructed youthful, active images, but rather than emphasizing appearance they focused on aspects of middle-class masculinity, including involvement in paid work and financial stability.

Peter, 72, framed working past retirement age as an indication of his vitality:

I really enjoy my work, and, with no mandatory company retirement, plan to work until it's not fun anymore. My work life compliments my busy personal life and gives me the purpose, energy, and vitality that helping others and goal setting brings. I am not defined by my work, but you need to know that I am not a couch potato and I'm used to being happy, busy, and productive in all phases of my life.

Retired men's profiles highlighted their past successes in the work sphere, as James, 54, claimed, "I was at the top of my profession." But more important, they framed retirement as giving them the freedom to pursue leisure interests, including costly ones like travel. In his profile, Richard, 70, stated:

One of my favorite things to do is to travel by auto. There is so much to see and do that I never tire of it. I generally have a destination in mind but take all kinds of side trips on the way. I like the coast and the mountains and like to see what's over the next hill, rarely making reservations ahead so as not to be restricted.

Also referencing travel, William's, 66, self-description stated,

My daughter recently gave me a book titled 1000 places you must see before you die, and I regard it as a challenge to check off more of the places listed than I have so far—I already have quite a few.

Similarly, Frank's, 61, profile, featuring pictures of a motorcycle and sports car, included "Summer time is Harley and Corvette time" and "Have done 49 states."

## DISCUSSION

This study sheds light on the experiences of a growing segment of the population—middle-aged and older singles using online dating websites. By focusing on this age group rather than younger adults who are the topic of prior studies, our findings reveal

how gender intersects with both aging and age inequality to shape the search for romantic partners. We find that middle-aged and older adults face expanded, yet gendered, opportunities for forming intimate relationships through online dating, which offers them the opportunity to either maintain or challenge their traditional approaches to dating.

Gendered experiences in previous relationships left women and men with different timetables for seeking new partners and also different approaches to their new dating experiences. Women moved more slowly toward new relationships, taking time to address their feelings or attend to children's emotional needs. They used online dating as a way to dip their toes into the dating pool and test the waters. In contrast, men were most comfortable being partnered and saw online dating as providing a way to dive headfirst into new dating opportunities. Differences in men's and women's dating timetables resonate with gendered family dynamics: Women felt obligated to care for the needs of others, while men felt a sense of entitlement to a caretaker. Future research would benefit from a more in-depth look at the factors shaping the pursuit of intimate relationships in later life and how they vary by gender.

Men and women also were motivated by different factors to try online dating. Men found that the traditional meeting places did not include women of appropriate ages or were not suitable settings for initiating romance. They viewed online dating as a way to expand their options and facilitate an efficient transition to a new relationship. Women faced other limitations that increased the appeal of online dating: Their networks lacked available men, and they felt hesitant to actively pursue men in face-to-face interactions. Online dating expanded women's universe of possible romantic partners and gave them greater control over the dating process. Despite this greater latitude, initial contact tended to be made by men rather than women; however, women did exert influence over the pace and termination of relationships. Extensions of this study should give closer attention to how men's and women's decisions and micro-level interactions in the online dating environment reflect and shape power dynamics in emergent intimate relationships.

Gender also interacted with relationship experiences across the life course to influence the types of relationships online daters sought. Women expressed desires for intimacy and companionship outside of traditional marriage because they recognized their disadvantages in these arrangements, but men wanted new marriages and all the perks that came with them. Online dating provided greater opportunities for women to find partners willing to “redo” gender relations, but only if the men they met were actually willing to compromise their desires and become more egalitarian in later life. To meet their relationship goals, middle-aged and older men and women typically targeted younger partners, although they had different motivations. Men wanted physically attractive women, and women looked for men who could participate in active social lives and intelligent conversation. However, in doing so both groups supported gendered ageist views: Men saw women’s beauty as declining with age, whereas women saw men’s liveliness diminishing (and thus their own caregiving obligations increasing). These stereotypical beliefs created by the intersection of gender and age inequality present further challenges in the rationalized context of online dating in which

participants are represented as summaries of characteristics (e.g., chronological age, number of children, or types of hobbies). Intersections of gender and age inequality also influenced decisions about self-presentation. Realizing the age penalty operating in the dating market, women and men enacted various strategies, including (occasionally) misrepresenting actual age and highlighting youthful identities and behaviors. Gender shaped these strategies: Women constructed youthful images consistent with heteronormative standards of feminine sexuality and attractiveness, while men created profiles highlighting middle-class masculinity, including involvement in paid work and financial stability. This self-marketing pressure can create tension with feelings of authenticity.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What inferences can be made regarding societal changes in the latter half of the twentieth century and changes in the dating system that occurred?
2. Explain the similarities and differences of online dating practices by: gender and age.