



Swipe, Love or Hate: A Phenomenological Study on Online Dating Among Middle Aged Professionals

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Abstract

Online dating has become a primary avenue for forming romantic relationships, particularly for middle-aged professionals. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences, motivations, and meanings this group creates while navigating the digital dating landscape. Utilizing hermeneutic phenomenological analysis with 10 middle-aged professionals, the research uncovered a complex interaction of hope, disillusionment, and pragmatic adjustment. Key themes emerged, including life-transitions, the reality of online dating, navigating midlife romance, personal growth, coping, and the perceived value of the experience. Participants viewed online platforms as a realm of possibility, but their experiences were deeply influenced by pre-existing life stories and societal norms about midlife romance. The findings highlight a significant tension between the idealized presentation of self and the lived reality, often complicated by factors such as aging, career pressures, and previous relational history. Ultimately, this study illustrates how middle-aged professionals continually interpret and re-interpret their online dating experiences based on their individual life-worlds. The results offer valuable insights into these unique experiences, which can inform strategies to promote safer and more effective engagement with online dating platforms.

Keywords: online dating, middle-aged professionals, "swipe culture", hermeneutic phenomenological analysis



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INTRODUCTION

The old adage, "there's someone for everyone," is particularly relevant for middle-aged individuals seeking love in the Philippines, despite societal expectations often centering marriage and family formation in this life stage. Their quest for companionship, essential for overall health, is complicated by socio-cultural changes due to globalization.

The Philippines is experiencing a "marriage squeeze" (Abalos, 2024)—an imbalance of available partners. Additional barriers include demanding work and long commutes (Dayrit & Lacap, 2020), as well as evolving partner preferences, all especially affecting middle-aged professionals.

The dating pool naturally decreases with age, and professional pressures restrict social opportunities. Furthermore, women returning to dating after loss (spousal death, divorce, or breakup) may face mental health issues, economic instability from marital settlements

(Langert, 2021), and co-parenting complications (Sackville, 2022). To overcome these constraints and widen their reach, most middle-aged singles have turned to the internet for dating.

The evolution of personal computers and mobile phones has significantly altered how people seek romantic relationships. A study by Wen (2024) indicates a major shift, with online platforms now being the primary way couples meet, surpassing traditional methods like introductions by friends or encounters in public places, for both heterosexual and same-sex couples. This highlights the internet's crucial role in making partner-seeking more efficient and far-reaching.

The paper ultimately discusses the opportunities and challenges of this digital connectivity, stressing the ongoing move toward digital interactions and the need for a balanced view on using technology to enhance interpersonal connections.

While online dating has grown, it still carries significant risks. Initial fears about predators and fraud have some validity, with data indicating the occurrence of technology-enabled sexual violence (Henry & Powell, 2018). In a way sophisticated dating scams, which are often financially devastating, are on the rise (Woodhead, L., Fagg, J., & Allen, J. 2024, BBC news). These scams exploit vulnerabilities through money-extortionate requests or fake relationship-building.

A related issue is catfishing—establishing a false online identity (Lauder & March, 2023)—which is often used in love scams targeting vulnerable individuals (Samaniego, 2024). Furthermore, beyond safety, online platforms have been linked to infidelity (e.g., the Ashley Madison data breach, Thomsen, 2015), and the "look-obsessed" nature of many dating sites is associated with body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Hosseini & Padhy, 2020; Blake et al., 2022).

Statement of the Problem. Despite ongoing challenges, online dating remains a popular way to seek romantic connections. Given the increasing reliance on technology, this study examined the specific online dating experiences of middle-aged professionals in the Philippines. It investigated their experiences, their effects on well-being, and the strategies used to cope with potential online dangers. The persistence of online dating suggests it is a lasting trend that will continue to evolve. This research explored the general online dating experiences of this demographic. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of online dating among Middle-Aged Professionals?
2. What context or situations influenced middle-aged professionals to engage in online dating?
3. What are the meanings derived from the experiences of middle-aged professionals with online dating?

Scope and Limitation. This study focused on the lived experiences of Filipino middle-aged professionals (35–55 years old) living in Metro Manila who had actively used one or more online dating apps for at least six months. Participants were men, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community, with civil statuses such as single, separated, annulled, or widowed. Only Filipino citizens were included, though their online partners could be of other nationalities.

As a phenomenological study, the findings depended on the participants' self-reports and personal interpretations. The results cannot be generalized widely because of the small sample size of ten participants and the limited geographic coverage. Challenges also included slow responses to invitations, difficulty scheduling interviews due to participants' busy lives, and minor interruptions during the interviews, such as background noise or phone calls. The study also did not measure whether online dating leads to lasting relationships nor did it examine the technical algorithms of dating platforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literatures establishes their specific contribution to the current study on the quest for midlife love in the digital age.

Online dating is defined as the search for a potential partner via the internet (Wright, 2020), originating with computer-based matchmaking in the US. Its popularity surged after the "internet explosion" of the 1990s and mainstream media portrayal (e.g., *You've Got Mail* in 1998, as noted by Ronan, 2023), reducing associated stigma. With widespread internet access and the pressures of modern lifestyles, many prefer online dating as a cheaper, easier, and more practical way to meet people (Banding, 2024 citing Franzetto, 2010). The online profile is a crucial element, acting as a vital communication cue and first source of information (Dai & Robbins, 2024). For some, online platforms serve as "training wheels" to diminish anxiety for those finding in-person

dating difficult (Lewandowski, 2024). The growing number of singles further fuels the use of these platforms as a strategic way to locate partners (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2022; Sharabi & Timmermans, 2021), driven by unmet relationship desires (Adamczyk et al., 2022). High frequency usage of dating apps has been associated with low well-being (Langert, 2021), though a proposed mediation effect involving self-objectification, body image concern, and decreased self-esteem was not confirmed. Dating apps vary in type, including queer-targeted apps like Blued and Grindr, and signaling/matching apps for heterosexuals like Tinder, which requires mutual interest for private messaging. User motives extend beyond traditional "dating" to include casual sex and killing time (Wang, 2020), as seen with apps like Grindr, which also functions as a social networking tool (Grindr, 2020).

Online dating influences perceptions of relationships and commitment. While platforms foster opportunities for long-term partnerships, the availability of unlimited choices can also encourage casual encounters and fear of commitment (Smith & Reynolds, 2022; Anderson & Vogels, 2022). Social expectations and cultural pressures to settle down push adults towards these platforms, though many now prioritize compatibility over societal timelines (Williams & Carter, 2021). Beyond romance, online platforms facilitate personal growth and self-discovery, enabling users to explore identities, refine communication skills, and gain confidence (Carter & Mitchell, 2023; Anderson & Vogels, 2022). However, users face emotional challenges like ghosting, rejection, performance anxiety, and fluctuating self-esteem (Williams & Parker, 2024; Muller, 2025). Setting realistic expectations and adopting healthy coping strategies are key to maintaining user satisfaction and emotional balance (Williams & Parker, 2024).

METHODS

Research Design. This study focused on exploring the lived experiences of middle-aged

professionals engaged in online dating. The research design employed in this study was the Qualitative Approach where the focus was on the meaning, experiences and perceptions as opposed to the numerical data and statistical analysis (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). This design was selected because it is best suited to explore and understand the lived experiences of individuals. The goal is not to generalize findings but to provide a deep, rich description of how middle-aged professionals perceive and make sense of their experiences with online dating. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' emotions, beliefs, and the meanings ascribed to their interactions.

Population and Sampling Technique. The study used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit 10 middle-aged professionals (35–55 years old) in Metro Manila who had actively used online dating platforms for at least six months. Participants, including those from the LGBT community, were recruited by securing permission from eight companies/institutions to post an invitation.

The six-month minimum experience ensures findings are based on a sufficient level of engagement, recognizing that people use online dating for various reasons (Pew Research Center, 2023). The final sample size of 10 was determined by data saturation, which, for a phenomenological study, typically falls between 8 to 15 participants, ensuring no new themes emerge (Bhandari, 2023). This approach aimed to yield rich, qualitative data reflecting diverse perceptions of the online dating experience.

Moreover, this approach was designed to ensure that participants provided rich, qualitative data that reflected their personal perceptions and emotional responses to the phenomenon. Participants were middle-aged professionals (35–55 years old) residing in Metro Manila, Philippines, (male, female, part of LGBT community) who had actively used online dating platforms for at least six months. These included individuals with diverse relationship status (single, separated, annulled, widowed) and professional backgrounds who are

presently working and have used at least one or more popular dating apps or platforms. By utilizing purposive sampling and number participants yielded by the saturation concept, this study aimed to identify individuals who not only fit the demographic criteria but also possessed diverse experiences with online dating platforms.

Instrumentation. This study employed in-depth, one-on-one interviews to investigate the subjective experiences of middle-aged professionals with online dating. A set of open-ended, semi-structured, and personalized interview questions was developed to explore their motivations, challenges, and the emotional and psychological impact of digital romance on their personal and social lives. These questions were specifically designed to uncover deeper narratives related to attraction, rejection, connection, and overall satisfaction with online dating platforms.

In addition, the interview protocol was validated by a panel of five experts, which included a Guidance Counselor, a Psychologist, a Language Professor, a Social Science Professor, and a psychometrician/Crisis-Intervention Respondent. Data was gathered through audio-recorded interviews and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis. This comprehensive approach allowed for the collection of detailed and deep insights into the participants' thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and experiences.

Data Gathering Procedure. The researcher recruited 10 participants for this study through an invitation distributed by HR practitioners. Before their face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, all participants provided signed informed consent detailing the study's purpose, methods, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. The interviews, which covered motivations, experiences (positive/negative), and coping tactics in online dating, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. To ensure triangulation, the researcher also conducted interviews with secondary sources (colleagues,

family, partners, etc.) provided by the main participants were done six face-to-face and four online, this is to verify emerging themes.

Data Analysis. In order to better analyze and interpret the data with the utmost goal of providing a rich and verified phenomenological representation of middle-aged professional experience with online dating, the following methods have been utilized: Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis, Thematic Analysis, and Triangulation Method.

A phenomenological reduction process was employed, following the framework developed by Martin Heidegger and outlined by Van Manen (1990), to uncover the essential structure of the participants' experiences. This rigorous process included the following steps:

1. **Transcription.** Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for accuracy.
2. **Immersive Reading.** The researcher read and re-read transcripts to gain a holistic sense of each experience.
3. **Horizontalization.** Significant statements related to the research question were extracted and listed.
4. **Clustering of Meanings.** Significant statements were grouped into themes and categories based on their underlying meaning.
5. **Essence Identification.** Themes were synthesized into a composite description capturing the fundamental structure of the phenomenon.

Moreover, to validate the themes emerged, a triangulation was done through stakeholders checking, for the verification of authenticity and commentary by the participants. In this study, triangulation method was utilized by having other sources of data to verify the participants' responses. Other data referred in this study pertained to those who participated in the

triangulation process were relatives and close friends of the participants as chosen by main participants as well.

Ethical Considerations. Throughout the study, ethical principles have been strictly followed. Informed consent obtained from all participants, clearly explaining the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their data. The identities of participants were protected through the use of pseudonyms and anonymization of all data. All recorded data will be stored securely and will be destroyed after the completion of the study. This commitment to ethical conduct ensures the well-being and privacy of all individuals involved. In detailed, prior to the execution of the face-to-face interview to the participants, an application was submitted to the Ethics Board of Adventist University of the Philippines, and an approval was obtained. Consent was secured for the voluntary participation before the participants was set for a one-on-one interview. All information was handled with utmost confidentiality. Furthermore, the manuscript of the study has also undergone Turnitin checked. The study obtained an acceptable score of 9% similarity index and 0 % artificial intelligence. Certificates on both screenings were obtained.

RESULTS

In this study, the researcher explored and investigated the phenomenological experiences of middle-aged professionals who have engaged in online dating. Guided by the semi-structured interview questions extracted from specific research questions, the participants' phenomenological experiences were explored.

1. The lived experiences on online dating among middle-aged professionals.

Table 1 shows the emergence of themes as data was analyzed following the research questions. Superordinate themes as the main chapters in a book about the online dating experience, while subordinate themes are the paragraphs and

sentences within each chapter that provide the specific, illustrative details.

Life-transitions. Participants cited their experiential joining of the “swipe” culture or online dating with the idea of looking for a potential romantic partner, cutting boredom and isolation, juggling work, personal and social life, pressure of meeting a partner in midlife and, some specifically, seeking for relationship, companionship and socialization. Different forms life-transitioning narratives led to what middle-aged professionals experienced in the dynamics of online dating. As stated by Williams and Carter (2021) societal norms often pressure adults to find a partner at a certain age, leading some to turn to online dating platforms. In this case, a motivation and a life-transition actual experiences came from the participants:

Table 1
Common Themes Generated from the Experiences of Middle-Aged Professionals on Online Dating

	Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
SOP 1	What are the lived experiences on online dating among Middle Aged Professionals?	
	Life-transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looking for potential romantic partner Got separated from previous partner Cutting boredom and Isolation Juggling of work, personal and social life Pressure of meeting a partner at middle ages Seeking relationships, companionship and socialization
	Vulnerabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety issues (like catfishing, harassment, scams) Fear of rejection Vulnerability when expressing their desire for a relationship
	Reality of Online Dating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disparity between online profiles and actual interactions Diverse experiences (both positive and negative) Emotional rollercoaster of online dating The challenge of meeting compatible partners
	Navigating Middle-Age Dating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hopeful possibilities in romance Keeping patience and persistence Mindful of realistic expectations Ensuring safety and boundaries Recharging social batteries
SOP 2	What context or situations have influenced middle-aged professionals to engage in online dating?	
	Lifestyle Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balancing professional and personal life Limited time for socialization Impact of professional identities and dating choices
	Hopeful Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Healing and moving on from failed relationships Longing committed and successful relationships Matches preferences in dating Future of romance
	Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural and norm Integration Risk of deception and superficiality Economical value and limitation of online vs traditional dating

SOP 3	What are the meanings derived from the experiences of middle-aged professionals with online dating?
Personal Growth and Self-Discovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased self-awareness • Learned valuable lessons • Adapting new skills • Necessity of time and effort • Prioritizing boundaries • Altered notion about human connection
Coping and Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better understanding of "do's and don'ts" in online dating • Cognitive and Emotional strategies from digital setbacks • Experiential online dating hacks • Normalizing online dating
Value and Meaning of Online Dating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convenience and Accessibility • Expanding Social Circles • Only a platform toward satisfying relationship • Success Stories and Positive Outcomes • Cultural Variations in Online Dating Practices

"I think I reached a certain point in life where, I am experiencing boredom and I feel like I really wanted to be with someone romantically. When that one hit me, I decided to download different uh social networking apps or dating apps on my phone. And when I started enjoying it, I experienced so many things". (Respondent 1, 35, Gay, 8th Grader Teacher).

"For me, peer pressure. Maybe, because of my age, I consider this online dating as my option. It seems like you already need to look for a partner, something like that." (Respondent 5, 36, Female, Language Instructor)

"I got separated from my spouse at that time, and then months—almost a year—later, I felt like I wanted someone by my side again. I told myself that I wanted to start dating again." (Respondent, 10, Female, Gaming Supervisor)

Findings somehow reinforces by Hochward and Brumberg (2024) comment that online dating may be a tremendous help for middle-aged people to build a strong relationship as their social networks shrink and they cannot turn into the existing people in their life to look for a date, especially if the circle is small and if the friend group has a close relationship with an ex-spouse for divorcees. Hence, a dating app widens the user's opportunity to meet more people to engage with. Participants here in the study greatly expressed that with their increasing age it's like a life-checked happened to them and made them realized that it's time to meet someone and online dating has been the easiest and readily platform to engage on that.

Vulnerabilities. Middle-aged individuals navigating online dating often experience hesitancy showing their vulnerabilities. These include concerns about safety—such as catfishing, harassment, and scams—as well as rejection and emotional risk of expressing a desire for a relationship. As the study progressed, participants shared narratives that revealed these fears in detail, including:

"With online dating, I found it easier to connect with other people but of course I had initial fears and worries. Like, what if it turned out bad, or what if I actually knew the person or what if they were rude, right? And also, what if they weren't really the person in the picture (catfishing)? Those kinds of things, they're common nowadays." (Respondent 6, 35, Female, Wellness Coach)

"When I started, it wasn't as enticing at the start. Then, you quickly realize it could be really messy at some point because it's online, you get to be victims of catfishing, get to be victimized, setting your expectations too high only to find out that the person you're actually meeting is not really who you expected nor the type of person that you would want but it can get quite addicting somehow because it's in the tip of your fingers, you can easily access the app or continue despite those possible dangers." (Respondent 4, 38, Gay, Senior Manager).

This findings from the study seem to confirm Muller (2025) findings on the challenges of online dating making some users at risk and vulnerable, his research explored how dating apps influence emotions and intimacy in "Love in the Digital Era: The Impact of Dating Apps on Emotions and Intimacy." The study highlights the gratification of emotions in online dating, leading to cycles of hope and disappointment. It also addresses challenges such as ghosting, performance anxiety, and self-esteem concerns due to idealized online profiles. While dating apps offer convenience, Muller also concluded they may contribute to superficial interactions and difficulty in forming deep relationships. While in this study this has been one of the worries expressed by the

participants in this study. According to almost most of them, this is likely the downfall of using an online dating application, you might experience that anxiety with profile, ghosting, and worst get scammed.

Reality of Online Dating. This study gathered diverse participants who engaged in online dating, leading to a wide range of real-life experiences. Some individuals encountered a significant disparity between online profiles and actual interactions, while others experienced a mix of both positive and negative encounters. Many described the emotional rollercoaster of online dating, along with the challenge of finding truly compatible partners. Some participants shared their frustration when the person they had connected with online felt drastically different in real life, highlighting the unpredictability of online dating dynamics as stated in these narratives:

“Once or twice, it didn't work out. It worked out as a relationship for a long time, but it didn't work out. We just got together for a year. Though we met online before the wedding. Then after that online chatting and dating, we got married. So we just got together for one year. Then we broke up. I thought that if you're always talking online, it's nice. But when we were together, we were still different. When we've met in person, it wasn't as good as when we were chatting online.” (Respondent 3, 38, Female, SHS Faculty).

“In fairness, online dating has been both good and bad for me. The good part is that it allows me to filter the kind of people I prefer to date—it feels streamlined because you can select the characteristics you're looking for in someone's profile. You can filter by age range, body type, interests, zodiac, even preferences. So instead of scrolling through everyone within a 20-kilometer radius, I can narrow it down to people closer to my age, say between 29 to 37 years old, qualities I'm interested in. That makes things easier, and the success rate is higher in finding someone who really matches what I'm looking for in companionship. But of course, there are downfalls too. Sometimes things don't work out after a few months. Still, two of my

previous long-term relationships actually came from online dating.” (Respondent 8, 36, Gay, Health and Wellness Specialist).

Inherent to swipe culture, involves a variety of expected positive and negative experiences. This aligns with Langert (2021) investigation into the frequency of usage and its consequences for well-being. He found that high-frequency usage is associated with low well-being among online dating app users. While the study proposed that this link was due to increased self-objectification, body image concern, and decreased self-esteem, the findings confirmed the relationship between high usage and low well-being but could not explain it via a mediation effect of these factors.

Online dating apps use a signaling and matching mechanism that allows private communication only after mutual interest. While marketing slogans, such as Tinder's "Match. Chat. Date," suggest romantic goals, Wang (2020) notes that user motives often extend to casual sex and killing time. Tinder, a prominent example, primarily serves heterosexual users who swipe left or right. Other platforms like Grindr, marketed as social networking for the LGBTQ+ community, are often viewed by researchers as "hook-up apps." Blued, the Chinese equivalent, adds features like live streaming. Ultimately, dating apps, categorized by their matching style, are often used differently than their marketed purpose.

Navigating Middle-aged Dating. Participants, as middle-aged professionals exploring digital dating platforms, expressed several key elements in their experiences: hopeful possibilities in romance, the importance of patience and persistence, maintaining realistic expectations, ensuring safety and setting boundaries, and the need to recharge their social batteries. Among the recommendations and narratives of the participants' online dating experiences were:

“When it comes to online dating, I can say that my own experience wasn't exceptionally great. But of course, we all have different destinies.

Who knows? For some, that might actually be the place where they find their soulmate or future partner. I've heard stories of people who succeeded meeting someone online and eventually building a lasting relationship together. That's why I believe there's really nothing wrong with continuing to explore online dating. What matters most is being wise and careful, especially when it comes to giving your trust." (Respondent 2, 47, Female, Seafarer)

"Yes. I mean, the world is changing a lot now. And in these days, there are people who don't have so much high social battery, so they don't want to be engaged with other people. They prefer online dating apps, its easy access. However, if you choose it, you need to know that person so much and so well and in the deepest way possible. A feature in particular I would recommend about online dating is I think the idea of the literal use of swipe left and swipe right. I said earlier, by just doing those things alone, you would realize what you want and what you don't want in a person. Like, you might see a guy who's too tall for you. Ah, not for me, I'm not that tall. So, swipe left. So, if the height is okay, the skin color is okay, I want this kind of color of guy that I can be with, swipe right. So, maybe the idea that you'll know what you want and what you don't want physically, yeah, it works." (Respondent 1, 35, Gay, 8th Grader Teacher)

With this emerged theme findings, the study of Franzetto & Orchard as cited by Banding (2024). Navigation of online dating app starts with the allure of starts with the ability to create your appealing profile that catch the interest of other online seekers which is a step crucial in attracting potential partners. Dai & Robbins (2024) mentioned that an online dating profile is a vital communication cue that communicates meanings on computer-mediated communication (CMC) platforms because this is the first source of information a user sends out. A dating profile can be constructed in a way where you can make it attractive enough to elicit positive responses for people get to know each other more. Online dating in the same way attracts individuals who find it difficult to do an

in-person or face-to-face dating as meeting and chatting online is regarded as a "training wheels" to help them warm up to dating and learn what they wanted (Lewandowski, 2024). In order to keep up with the changes and the growing needs of humans to connect, software applications that cater online dating were created. A dating application also known as a dating app is defined as a software application designed to create a connection between two people who are looking for romance, casual sex or friendship; it relies on an internet connection which most people in the world have access to (Orchard, 2019).

2. Situations influencing middle-aged professionals to engage in online dating.

Lifestyle Integration. For middle-aged professionals, online dating is more than just an app. It is something intricately woven into their routines, responsibilities, and current life stage. This study gathered data on how online dating fits into, clashes with, or harmonizes with their lifestyles. Key themes that emerged include the balance between professional and personal life, and the limited time available for socialization, and the influence of professional identities on dating choices.

It's hard to meet someone at work because most of the people, I'm with are actually my clients. And as a coach, it's not allowed to date clients. That's why online dating has become a possible option for me to meet people. On average, I'd say I spend about two to three hours a day on it. What I really want to achieve from online dating is genuine connection, and if possible, for it to eventually lead to a relationship. But honestly, my initial goal is simply to have someone to talk to—someone I can have conversations with. Because, you see, conversation for me is already a way of battling stress. In my line of work, I'm always the one listening to others, but through these online apps, I get the chance to share my own stories. And that, for me feels like an outlet. (Respondent 6, 35, Female, Wellness Coach).

Some other participants see online dating as a natural avenue among LGBTQ members as it fits their lifestyle when it comes to dating.

It's not really traditional dating for me. It's more of online dating; it fits me well. I think it can also be more challenging if you're part of the LGBTQ+ community. It's not always ideal, right? Unlike for a straight man and a straight woman, where you can just meet someone, ask them out, and start doing things together, in my case, within the LGBTQ+ community, it's not that usual to just suddenly meet someone and immediately date them. And sometimes, if I may add, things can happen very abruptly. Like, if we click on online dating, then we meet in person and everything goes smoothly, it can sometimes lead to a real relationship. But if not, then we just move on to the next stage—or simply move on from each other, laughs—that's easy.” (Respondent 1, 35, Gay, 8th Grader Teacher).

This emerged theme findings, hugely supported by several literature in the past. One prominent to include is a study by Johnson and Lee (2023) titled Digital Romance and Career: The Intersection of Work-Life Balance and Online Dating explored how professionals navigate romantic relationships while managing their careers. The research found that many adults prefer online dating due to its convenience and flexibility as it allows them to meet potential partners without disrupting their schedules.

Hopeful Expectations. The study gathered narratives that reflect participants' goals and expectations in online dating. Some sought healing and closure after failed relationships, using the platform as a way to move forward emotionally. Others expressed a longing for committed and successful relationships, hoping to find a partner who aligns with their preferences and values in dating and such narratives include:

“During the pandemic, I had this sideline as virtual assistant, when I met that group of people, it was like online group chatting, of course, a change of friends' circles, so it's nice to talk to them. Also, you just want to know what their lifestyle is. Especially foreigners, so you

want to show them different places. So, I got to know them better. Originally, my goal is to meet foreign nationals. That time, the one I met was a foreigner. In my dating profile, I usually follow foreigner members. That's the matches I hope to achieve. Moreover, I have had failed relationships with Filipinos, and maybe if it's a foreigner, it might be successful this time.” (Respondent 3, 37, Female, SHS Faculty).

“What did I hope to achieve? Ah for them to say yes—because that's the person I liked. You chat with them, they reply, then eventually you meet in person, and hopefully become a couple. But in my case, I had already seen that person before in real life, so I looked them up on Facebook. And that's how we matched right away.” (Respondent 7, 35, Male, Logistic Associate)

Prominent to results of this study is the hope that a middle-aged professional online dating users may find its way to love – a romantic love to be specific. Seemingly, past researches also dwell on the online dating site as Digital Avenue if you are on the look for love. A study made by Adamczyk et. al, (2022) entitled Never-Married Single Adults Experiences with Online Dating Websites and Mobile Applications: A Qualitative Content Analysis, in a Polish sociological interview-based study involving 20 professionally active and never-married single adults (aged 28–40 years) who used dating websites showed, among other outcomes, that single individuals believe that initiating new relationships via the Internet is currently the only reasonable way to search for a partner.

The participants in this study also expressed ambivalent attitudes toward searching for a lifetime partner via the Internet; thus, they preserved their dating accounts without assuming that they would find “their soul mates” through such websites.

Sustainability. This study also gathered participants' experiences regarding the usefulness and longevity of online dating. Their narratives led to the emergence of key concepts, including the future of romance, the

integration of online dating into cultural and social norms, the risks of deception and superficiality, and the economic value and limitations of online versus traditional dating. Some participants particularly stated that they see online dating as a lasting phenomenon.

“This seems to be the trend now—it’s what’s popular. Before, it used to be blind dates. Now, it’s more like an online blind date. Actually, I don’t really see much struggle when it comes to online dating, because everything is just a click away. You just have to think carefully first, get to know the person, and then filter everything. If we compare it to traditional dating, online is definitely more convenient. First, it saves time. For example, during the getting-to-know-each-other stage before, we had to go out and meet in a certain place. Now, it’s enough to just chat or video call—and it costs less, too. Personally, I prefer it more because if you don’t feel like talking to someone anymore, you can easily just drop the conversation. I think online dating platforms will be around for a long time. We really have to adapt to technology and accept the fact that we are now living in a society that is truly driven by it.” (Respondent 5, 36, Female, Language Instructor)

However, some participants neutrally stand and still see the less complication of traditional form of dating compared to online dating.

“Actually, I think it could go either way—it really depends on the person but for me, I’d probably lean more toward traditional. That’s also part of my struggle. Like, when I become comfortable with someone online, I still find it hard to actually meet them in person. Online, everything feels so fine, but I don’t know if I’ll feel the same once we meet face-to-face. Plus, you also can’t help but think about the risks—what if it’s a scam, what if something bad happens, or what if the sincerity you felt online isn’t real in person?” (Respondent 6, 35, Female, Wellness Coach).

Modern dating is complex, driven by shifts like the normalization of hookup culture and liberal ideas challenging traditional monogamy

(Kallman, 2024). Online dating offers advantages by expanding limited social circles and allowing busy professionals to meet partners on their own time, especially given the increased workplace responsibilities and social mobility of the 21st century (Anderson et al, 2020). For some, the motivation is finding a physical connection to balance a demanding professional life.

Conversely, societal pressures often compel adults to seek partners by a certain age, pushing them toward online dating (Williams and Carter, 2021). However, the priority for many adults remains compatibility over strictly adhering to these social expectations.

3. Meanings derived from the experiences of the middle-aged professionals with online dating.

Personal Growth and Self-Discovery. By probing into the lived experiences of users, this study uncovers the ways in which online dating has contributed to or hindered personal growth and self-discovery. The specific areas explored include increased self-awareness, valuable lessons learned, adaptation to new skills, recognition of the necessity of time and effort, prioritization of boundaries, and the development of better preferences in a partner. Some participants cited that through online dating, they have become more aware of their wants, needs, and desires, while also adopting new skills they never realized they had or could develop.

“I think one of the things I’ve learned is that it’s a totally different ballgame. Every time I meet someone new, you learn how to adjust and adapt to the person you’re talking to. For example, if they tell you, ‘I don’t like loud or very talkative people,’ then sometimes I also adjust. Since they don’t like it, I try not to be noisy or overly talkative, and I become more careful with my words, so I don’t offend them. As for key lessons, I’d say one is learning to be more patient. If you really want to succeed in using online dating apps, you need patience—because it’s not an overnight success. It’s not like you start using it today and by tomorrow you’ll

already meet the right person for you. No, it doesn't." (Respondent 1, 35, Gay, 8th Grader Teacher)

"I've gained a lot of good things from online dating. Of course, I was able to develop my socialization skills, and I also grew emotionally through the people I got to know. Personal growth? Yes, definitely—it really added to that. As for relationships in general, I've learned a lot. Through online dating, I was able to filter who's worth keeping and who's not. But of course, there are many fake people out there—you never really know if someone could harm you, because they can easily hide behind the apps. That's why I also learned to be careful when swiping and to always be mindful." (Respondent 5, 36, Female, Language Instructor)

Findings from this emerged theme likely support the study conducted by Carter and Mitchell (2023) titled Seeking More than Love: Online Dating and Personal Growth investigated how individuals perceive online dating beyond romantic relationships. The research found that many users engage in online dating not only for companionship but also for self-exploration, social networking, and confidence-building. The study noted that digital dating platforms allow individuals to refine their communication skills, express their preferences openly, and gain insights into their own relationship needs.

Coping and Resilience. This study explored how middle-aged professionals cope with dangers inherent in online dating. They have identified coping mechanisms that they employ to maintain their self-esteem and motivation. This includes emergence of sub concepts of better understanding of "do's and don'ts's" in online dating, cognitive and emotional strategies from digital setbacks, and experiential hacks in online dating. Some narratives of the participants particularly validated these concepts:

"Some negative experiences from online dating? Well, I experienced being ghosted. How did I move on from that? I just looked for someone else laughs—found another person to chat with

again. But of course, I still felt sad about it because, in a way, it's also a form of rejection, right? Still, it didn't last long. I just started chatting again, and eventually I met my present partner—and now we're happy together." (Respondent 10, 45, Gaming Supervisor)

"Maybe ghosting—like what I mentioned earlier—there was this one time I was really expecting that we were finally going to meet. But then, all of a sudden, because of the poor signal on the ship, I lost connection. He probably couldn't reach me, and I couldn't reach him at that moment either. So, I thought, okay, I'll just consider that as ghosting. When the signal came back after a few days, I tried to contact him, but it felt like he was already gone—I never heard from him again. Of course, I felt sad and a bit disappointed. But eventually, in the weeks that followed, I moved on. I just started browsing again. It was just another experience." (Respondent 2, 47, Female, Seafarer).

This findings through the emerged theme likely to support researches in the past of taking cautious and risk awareness of the potentiality of online dating to its users. Likewise with the research of Williams and Parker (2024) examined the psychological effects of online dating in their study Love, Rejection, and Resilience: The Emotional Impact of Digital Dating. Their findings indicated that while online dating offers excitement and new experiences, it also presents emotional challenges such as ghosting, anxiety, and self-esteem issues. The study suggested that individuals who set realistic expectations and maintain a balanced perspective on digital dating tend to experience higher satisfaction and reduced emotional distress.

Value and Meaning of Online Dating. Participants' narratives revealed the value they gained and the meaning they attached to their online dating experiences. With these narratives, the study uncovered key themes regarding the interpretation of online dating. The emergence of these sub-concepts includes normalizing online dating, recognizing its convenience and accessibility, understanding

that expanding social circles serves only as a platform toward a satisfying relationship, identifying success stories and positive outcomes, and acknowledging cultural variations in online dating practices.

Some participants claimed that online dating only serves as an initial step toward a relationship and should be normalized. They emphasized that it does not matter whether a relationship begins online or through traditional means—what truly matters is what happens after the initial meeting.

“Yes, I would say it was meaningful. It was valuable because it gave you an insight on the different people that you will meet. Like I said, it’s just a medium. What happens after is what counts. So it gave you a much broader perspective of what you want to find. Out there or what you want to find in a party so some people may contest that it made things easy, yes it made things easy, maybe people able to connect as easy as possible, but it also gives you a sense of choice whether you want to proceed or not because you still have other people there in that app that would be able to match with your actual needs. I guess online dating gave me a lot of good lessons. Which I wouldn’t say that traditional dating wouldn’t give me as well. It’s the same thing. Though, people should normalize online dating as avenue to meet potential partners”. (Respondent 4, 38, Gay, Senior Manager).

On the other hand, some participants mentioned how online dating has led her to attaining happiness that is why it was quite meaningful to her.

“Yes, because that’s how I met my husband. That alone makes it meaningful. But honestly, I wasn’t really that interested in online dating at first. I wasn’t too invested in it when I started. Until eventually, I happened to chat with the man who is now my husband. He’s an American, and what really caught my attention was that he sent me Bible verses. That made me think, maybe he’s genuine, because who would take the time to share that? I got to know him more,

and slowly, feelings developed. And now, he is my husband”. (Respondent 9, 52, Female, Call Center Agent).

Research indicates that online dating provides significant positive outcomes, such as facilitating social integration and expanding opportunities for cross-cultural and meaningful connections beyond immediate social circles (Journal of Digital Relationships, 2025). This accessibility has helped reshape traditional courtship practices in a fast-paced society. However, the experience is also marked by emotional complexities. While offering excitement, digital dating presents challenges like ghosting, anxiety, and self-esteem fluctuations (Williams and Parker, 2024). The key to higher satisfaction and reduced emotional distress is setting realistic expectations and maintaining a balanced perspective.

DISCUSSION

The landscape of dating has undergone a significant transformation with the advent of online platforms. While often associated with younger generations, online dating is increasingly prevalent among middle-aged professionals. Online dating is highly relevant for middle-aged professionals navigating unique challenges like career demands, past relationship baggage, and a youth-oriented dating culture. The convenience, flexibility, and broad accessibility of online platforms make them ideal for busy lifestyles, effectively expanding their social networks (Johnson & Lee, 2023). Participants in this study generally reported high comfort with technology and appreciated the economic nature of online socialization.

Moreover, in terms of lived experience and meaning-making, participants lived experiences were characterized by a complex mix of practicality, emotional vulnerability, caution, and optimism as they seek meaningful connection. While online dating presents emotional challenges like rejection and anxiety (Williams and Parker, 2024), success stories

demonstrate its potential for fostering genuine relationships (Poposki, 2025).

Furthermore, the study delves beyond description to explore how professionals create meaning from these experiences, focusing on three key themes: Identity Negotiation: Professionals must reconcile their established self with the curated online persona, engaging in selective self-presentation to manage vulnerability and attract partners. Navigating Past Experiences: Previous relationships (including divorce or trauma) fundamentally shape their expectations and strategies for new partnerships, requiring reflective sense-making and searching for authentic connection: Despite the digital environment, the primary goal remains finding authentic, meaningful connections based on shared values and life goals, rather than superficial encounters.

Understanding these experiences is crucial for improving online spaces to be more inclusive and conducive to fostering genuine connection across all age groups as well as securing a promotion of sound mental health while engaged in the "swipe culture" era of dating.

Conclusion. This phenomenological study delved into the online dating experiences of middle-aged professionals, uncovering ten substantial themes that emerged from three research questions. The findings reveal a rich and multi-dimensional experience marked by both opportunities and pitfalls, uniquely shaped by the participants' professional lives and previous relationship histories. Their motivations for engaging in online dating were diverse, commonly including time constraints from busy careers, the need to expand social circles, a growing acceptance of online relationship platforms, and triggering life changes such as separation or widowhood. Crucially, the process of assigning meaning to these encounters was highly individualistic: while some participants reported feeling empowerment and self-expression, others described frustrations stemming from superficiality or failed expectations. Ultimately, learning, adapting, and maintaining perspective

proved essential for crafting a rewarding experience, suggesting the necessity for further investigation into the distinct needs of this demographic within the evolving digital dating landscape.

Recommendations. Findings from this study identified several factors that may guide future research and practical improvements in online dating platforms for middle-aged professionals. Future research and online dating platform should concentrate on five primary areas to enhance the user experience and well-being. First, studies must investigate the Work-Life Intersection and Professional Identity, examining how professionals manage the time demands of dating alongside their careers, how they present their professional identity on profiles, and the ethical issues of dating colleagues. Second, researchers need to focus on Psychological and Emotional Well-being by using longitudinal studies to track how this group handles challenges like rejection and ghosting, builds resilience, and how the "performance" of digital dating affects their self-worth and mental health outcomes (stress, anxiety, and depression). Third, research should examine Safety and Security Measures, specifically the users' adoption of safety protocols and the platforms' ability to mitigate risks like romance scams and identity theft, which this financially secure demographic is vulnerable to. Fourth, platforms should develop Tailored Features that meet this group's unique needs, such as allowing clear articulation of relationship goals, utilizing algorithms that prioritize lifestyle compatibility (like work-life balance), and offering flexible communication tools, such as voice notes, for busy schedules. Finally, platforms must also integrate Personal Growth and Support Resources, offering tools like journaling prompts and personality assessments, alongside comprehensive support via webinars and community forums to help users manage stress and build resilience. Implementing these changes will ultimately foster a more supportive, safe, and fulfilling environment that promotes healthy relationships and overall well-being for middle-aged professionals.

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