

The Quest for Connection: Older Australian Adults Online Dating Expectations Versus
Reality

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**The Quest for Connection: Older Australian Adults Online Dating Expectations Versus
Reality**

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8 October 2024

Word Count: 14 997

Being a report of an investigation submitted as a partial requirement for the award of
Bachelor of Psychology (Honours), at the University of Southern Queensland

Statement of Originality

This report contains no material offered for the award of any other degree or diploma, or material previously published, except where due reference is made in the text.

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Acknowledgements

There are several people I would like to express my deepest appreciation to for their help throughout the thesis writing process. To my thesis supervisor, Dr. Sonya Winterbotham, who has been amazing. Your support, recommendations, empathy, and encouragement have been vital to the completion of my thesis. Thank you for the insights gained, the laughs had and the numerous chats. Your guidance has gotten me through this year, and I could not have done without it.

I would like to thank the academic and support staff of the University of Southern Queensland as a whole. Their support has been paramount in me completing the thesis on time and to this high of a standard.

To my parents, I thank you for infusing in me the ideals and lessons that you have learnt over your lifetimes. From you both, I have learnt selflessness, dedication, and compassion, which I credit with helping lay the foundations for my research. To my mum, Azalech, who may have not understood what I was talking about half the time, but always made an effort to express her interest. To my dad, Abeje, I thank for his patience in listening to me this past year in our interesting discussions, reading my thesis despite its length, and being my ultimate supporter! As it is for most of the things I have done in my life, I could not have done it without you both, seriously. I love you both.

To my best friends, Dikshya and Suman, I could not write this thesis without your suggestions and distractions, both equally important. From them both, I learnt the importance of taking a break amid many writers block episodes. I have experienced the best friendships that I hope last me forever. Thanks for the endless support, especially after hearing me prattle on about my thesis for the 100th time!

And lastly and most importantly, to my participants, each of whom have bravely and kindly provided their stories for my thesis. I have learnt from you all the power of perseverance and resilience. Thank you! And may you all find the love and companionship that you seek.

Abstract

With an increasing older population, understanding the evolution of social connections and reducing isolation in later life through online dating is essential. Previous research overlooks the Australian context and focuses on self-presentation, successful ageing, and gender roles, limiting the exploration of how these factors intersect to shape expectations and realities for older adults in online dating. Using a constructivist approach to analyse qualitative data, this study aimed to explore older Australian adults online dating expectations versus the reality of their experiences. A total of 27 participants (aged 60 to 76 years old) took part in an online survey, with six participants undertaking follow-up interviews. Data were analysed inductively using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings showed that older adults enter online dating with a clear set of expectations related to the health, physical characteristics, and personality traits of their potential partner. Older adults continually experience differences in others self-presentation online and their true selves. Additionally, older adults experience conflict between traditional gender role expectations and modern online dating practices. Misalignment between online dating expectations and reality engenders disappointment. Despite these challenges, most older adults remain committed to continuing online dating. The findings from this research could guide future development around theories on misrepresentation in online dating and offer recommendations for improving online dating platforms and government public health messaging to better support older adults.

Keywords: expectations vs reality, older adults, online dating, self-presentation, successful ageing

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview of the Research

Meaningful social connections in later life are associated with increased overall wellbeing and longevity, crucial for optimal ageing (Jordan, 2023). While much of current research on ageing focuses on healthcare and quality of life, maintaining social connections is also crucial to reducing isolation and managing adverse health outcomes (Van Orden et al., 2021). Online dating offers a valuable avenue to cultivate these connections (VandeWeerd et al., 2016).

Online dating is the use of online websites and applications to construct online dating profiles reflecting an individual's identity to meet prospective partners (Peng, 2022). Dissatisfaction with traditional dating methods and a desire for a greater pool of candidates have led to the growing prevalence of online dating (McWilliam & Barret, 2014). This trend emphasises the need for more current research in this area.

Previous dated literature have discussed older adults online dating self-presentation, successful ageing, and gender roles with few studies examining how a combination of these contribute to the formation of expectations and their alignment with the realities that older adults experience when dating online (McWilliam & Barrett, 2014; Wada et al., 2019). The main objective of this thesis is to utilise self-presentation, successful ageing, and gender roles to explore older Australian adults' expectations of online dating versus the reality of their experiences. By gaining an understanding of this topic, the study aims to contribute to current literature and provide recommendations for improving online dating platforms and government public health messaging.

This chapter presents a comprehensive literature review of older adults and online dating by providing a background on dating in later life, including motivations, preferences,

and associated risks. This discussion will be contextualised utilising the aforementioned constructs. The current study and research gaps will be discussed at the conclusion of the review. By using a constructivist worldview to examine data from qualitative online surveys and follow-up interviews, this study aims to provide a better understanding of how these concepts intersect in the subsequent chapters where the methods, findings and discussion will be presented.

Defining Older Adults

Older adults are defined as people aged 60 years and older (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). Worldwide, as of 2020, an estimated 1 billion people were 60 years and over, a figure which is expected to double by 2050 (World Health Organization, 2024). As of 2017, in Australia, older adults aged 65 and over comprised 16% of the total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2018). This is expected to grow to 21-23% of the population by 2066 due to factors such as an increase in life expectancy and decreases in fertility rates (ABS, 2018; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2023).

Additionally, in Australia, an increase in the ageing population is especially pronounced due to fertility rates peaking at 3.1 after the second world war, leading to the self-titled generation known as ‘baby boomers’, born between 1946 and 1966 (ABS, 2004; Healy, 2004; National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre, 2009). The initial wave of this generation began to turn 60 in 2006, marking the onset of transitions into the next stage of their life.

Successful Ageing

An increasing ageing population emphasises the importance of addressing issues relevant to older adults, such as wellbeing. Successful ageing is crucial in this context and is defined by Rowe and Kahn (1997) as an individual achieving optimal psychological and

physiological functioning in later life. A review of the literature separates successful ageing into two dimensions: biomedical and psychosocial (Bowling & Dieppe, 2005; Urtamo et al., 2019). The biomedical definition of successful ageing is the optimisation of life expectancy by avoiding disease and disability and maintaining cognitive abilities and physical functions (Bowling & Dieppe, 2005). With Australia ranking third in worldwide life expectancy in 2022, 81.2 years for males and 85.3 years for females (ABS, 2023), maintaining this aspect of successful ageing becomes vital to quality of life, and can lead to socio-economic benefits by preventing labour market exits and reducing medical costs (Okamoto et al., 2023). Past studies have found that the presence of factors such as increased mobility and exercise in later life are associated with successful ageing (Davis et al., 2015). These physical aspects are closely related to cognitive functionality as everyday decision-making regarding safety, medication administration and money management can determine how effectively older adults can avoid disability and disease, and attain physical health (Hartley et al., 2017).

The psychosocial definition accounts for older adults who age well despite their physical limitations and includes active engagement in life and effective psychological and behavioural processes (Urtamo et al., 2019). Active engagement is the cultivation of social connections and relationships, a crucial contributor to overall longevity (Moss et al., 2024). While ageing itself does not directly induce social isolation, risk factors such as lack of social connections can precipitate it, leading to premature mortality (Suragarn et al., 2021). Furthermore, limited social connections can yield unhealthy behaviours, diminished wellbeing and poor health outcomes (Van Orden et al., 2021). However, previous studies have shown that older adults who live with family or engage in leisure activities and community involvement have better wellbeing and life satisfaction (Acosta, 2019; Boudiny & Mortelmans, 2011; Fernández-Portero et al., 2023).

In a Finnish study examining self-perceptions of components of successful ageing in over 90-year old's (55% female), the majority of the 45 participants perceived psychosocial components of ageing as more important than physical components (Nosraty et al., 2015). As participants physical, cognitive, and social functioning declined, they focused on adapting their living circumstances or employing psychological mechanisms to maintain a sense of control, supporting the idea that in older age, the focus becomes optimising strengths and compensating for weaknesses. Participants also stressed the importance of cognitive functionality and being pain free.

An important psychosocial aspect is resiliency, the ability to maintain function in the face of adversity (Pruchno & Carr, 2016). In Australia, the overall prevalence of physical or mental disability in those aged 65 years and over was 52.3% in 2022, with 41.4% having a profound or severe limitation (ABS, 2024), making it impractical to expect the majority of older adults to meet Rowe and Kahn's (1997) definition of successful ageing. Resilience is crucial to older adults' navigation of the challenges associating with ageing and can be cultivated by building emotional support and increasing engagement opportunities through social connections (Trică et al., 2024). It is this merging of the biomedical and psychosocial aspects that reflects a shift in our understanding of successful ageing to a more holistic view (Urtamo et al., 2019).

Although this highlights the significance of bolstering social support for older adults, social connections are not just limited to family and friends. Fostering romantic relationships through dating could serve to alleviate social isolation (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009). Stereotypes such as asexuality and being socially withdrawn falsely permeates societal understandings of old age, an outdated view that has been continually disproved (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Carr, 2004; Watson et al., 2016). Online dating offers an avenue for

older adults to form social connections, promoting engagement and wellbeing (Harris, 2022; McIntosh et al., 2011). By contributing to the dimensions of successful ageing, online dating can increase overall life-satisfaction and wellbeing.

Older Adults and Online Dating

Significant social transformations, including evolving social norms, changing demographics and the increasing need for social connection, have contributed to the increased prevalence of older adults engaging in online dating (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009). In Australia, as of 2011, the percentage of older adults living alone aged 60-69 was 17.5% and 70-79 was 24.3% (De Vaus & Qu, 2015). Moreover, the opportunities for them to form social connections can diminish due to the loss of loved ones, divorce, retirement, and relocation (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009). In 2021, of Australians aged 55 years and older, over 15% were experiencing loneliness and over 10% were feeling socially isolated (AIHW, 2024). To reduce this trend, older adults are increasingly turning to online dating (Wion & Loeb, 2015).

Prevalence of Online Dating

While precise figures regarding the prevalence of older adults who online date in Australia remain elusive due to a shortage of empirical data, estimations can be inferred from a 2018 report generated by CoreData Research, a global market research company, for Australian Seniors Insurance which surveyed 1,000 older Australian adults over 50. According to the findings, 56.3% of older adults used online dating sites and of those, 88.7% used mainstream sites such as eHarmony¹ instead of older adult-specific sites such as Silver Singles². Among those who did use online dating, 8.3% used it daily and 17.8% at least two

¹ An online dating website targeted towards long-term relationships based on algorithm-based compatibility (Gupta et al., 2012).

² An online dating website targeting single adults aged 50 and above (SilverSingles, n.d.).

times a week. This report has limitations as it was generated for market research, placing the data's reliability in question. However, it did employ quotas in the sample collection to ensure the representativeness of each state.

Motivations and Preferences for Dating

Motivations to commence dating can vary among men and women. In qualitative interviews conducted by Watson and Stelle (2011) in the US, a sample of 14 women aged 64 to 77 stated that their primary reasons for dating included desires for remarriage, companionship, and physical intimacy. Watson et al. (2016) re-examined the same group of older women and found that sexual desires were also present. Another study by McWilliam and Barrett (2014) assessed the experiences of 20 older adults aged 53-74 who were engaged in online dating (8 men, 12 women). The primary motivation for the older women was wanting companionship outside of marriage as they considered themselves disadvantaged by traditional marriage. Though these three studies are limited in their ability to generalise due to their small sample sizes, and all participants being white and from the US; they do provide some insight related to the dating motivations of older women.

McWilliam and Barrett (2014) concluded that older men sought dating for committed relationships and marriage due to having narrower social networks and a desire for both practical and emotional support. These findings supported earlier, albeit dated, research conducted by Carr (2004) in the US involving 210 participants (72% female) which explored remarriage desires in widows and widowers over 65 years old. The study revealed that in the event of widowhood or divorce, older men with lower levels of social support sought dating to mitigate their loneliness and isolation as they relied on partners for emotional intimacy (Carr, 2004).

In terms of dating preferences, McWilliam and Barrett (2014) found that older men *and* women preferred younger partners but were driven by different motivations. For older men, attracting younger women who met youthful beauty standards and attractiveness symbolised masculine success. For older women, younger men promised a joint active lifestyle and a reduced likelihood of requiring caregiving.

Furthermore, in a US study conducted by McIntosh et al. (2011), the internet dating profiles of 100 older men and women (over 65 years old) were compared to the profiles of 100 younger men and women (under 35 years old). The study revealed that older adults desired partners who were in good health and had an active lifestyle, aligning with their own desire to maintain their quality of life and lessen caregiving burdens. Other important values were emotional support, financial stability, shared values and interests, religion, and characteristics such as height and ethnicity. Older adults also exhibited higher standards and selectivity as compared to younger daters, possibly due to their life experiences and them having a clearer understanding of qualities important for a successful relationship. This study relied on personal profiles where there is a risk of misleading information.

Why Online Dating?

With increased internet access, online dating has emerged as a convenient tool for meeting potential partners (Malta, 2007). In McWilliam and Barrett's study (2014), men expressed dissatisfaction with traditional meeting places such as bars or workplaces, citing either a lack of women that met their preferences, or unsuitable settings. These views are echoed in VandeWeerd et al.'s (2016) study, which interviewed 45 older US women aged 50 to 77 recruited through the online dating platform PlentyofFish³. These women expressed that traditional dating channels, such as churches and bars, were no longer viable options. They

³ An online dating website targeted towards fostering meaningful relationships (Bignell & Hastings, 2013).

either deemed it inappropriate to seek potential partners in these settings or felt their age prevented them from frequenting these places. Older women reported that their social networks lacked suitable partners, where available partners are often ex-partners or widowers of friends, making it uncomfortable to pursue them (McWilliam & Barrett, 2014).

Using online platforms, older adults can create multiple profiles, increasing their exposure and dating pool (VandeWeerd et al., 2016). They can also use filters and the website algorithm to screen out undesirable qualities in a romantic partner (e.g. by height or weight) while identifying desired qualities to enhance compatibility and reduce the fear of rejection (Erjavec & Fišer, 2016; VandeWeerd et al., 2016). Dating websites can also cater to specific markets such as Gay Seniors⁴, facilitating the search for compatible matches (Gay Seniors, n.d.; VandeWeerd et al., 2016).

Online dating can also assist in maintaining social connections for older adults when there are restrictions on using in-person methods of dating. Research carried out by Harris (2022) in the US demonstrated how the 2019 Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected online dating in older adults. COVID-19 led to worldwide lockdowns, social restrictions and mask mandates that persisted into 2022 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Parliament of Australia, 2023). In this study, 50 men and 50 women aged 60 to 83 participated in semi-structured interviews. Findings indicated that due to feelings of increased isolation and loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic, older adults were highly motivated to seek romantic partners online as they considered in-person dating to pose higher health risks. Older adults took safety precautions such as mask-wearing and opting for outdoor dates. However, these findings could have arisen from the specific circumstances and societal behaviours that occur during a pandemic, which may be temporary.

⁴ An online dating site catering to older gay men from Australia (Gay Seniors, n.d.).

Risks of Online Dating for Older Adults

The risks of online dating for older adults are even more pronounced due to the vulnerable nature of the cohort. Internet dating scams are common ways for people to take advantage of older adults. These scams often involve perpetrators initiating online relationships with older adults and then fabricating emergencies (such as the illness of a relative) to elicit money from them, after which the perpetrator will either ask for more money or disappear (Buchanan & Whitty, 2014). The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC; 2019) reported that in 2018, Australians aged over 65 submitted reports of losses of over \$5.8 million to dating and romance scams. This report emphasized the need for increased support and education for older adults in navigating the world of online dating.

In a study conducted by Buchanan and Whitty (2014), of the 853 participants from a European online dating site aged 19 to 81 ($M = 46.4$ years, 56% women), 137 had been financially romance scammed, and the losses ranged from less than USD 160 to over USD 160,000. Victims also experienced substantial emotional distress, regardless of whether money was taken. Some scams involved victims being blackmailed with footage of them performing sexual acts on webcams. While this study was not focused exclusively on older adults, the results clearly indicate risks associated with online dating.

In the study by VandeWeerd et al. (2016), older women reported that they regularly received unwanted sexual messages and pictures of men's genitalia online. During dates, women described instances of stalking, and men becoming sexually aggressive and making threats. Further risks include personal information such as bank accounts and credit card numbers being compromised and younger users engaging in 'trolling' behaviour towards older adults, such as catfishing them for amusement (Wion & Loeb, 2015). Online dating

may also lead to riskier sex behaviours, such as condom omission, resulting in increased vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections (Bateson et al., 2012).

Self-Presentation in Online Dating

Expectations are “probabilistic beliefs” that influence our decisions and behaviours in anticipation of expected experiences (Panitz et al., 2021). In online dating, older adults’ expectations may be based on their partner requirements, with online daters having a 'shopping list' of characteristics they desire in their potential partner, adding new qualities as they peruse their pool of candidates (Whitty, 2008). Expectations may also be based on others' self-presentation online (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2013). Self-presentation in the online space is the tendency for people to manage how others perceive them by displaying positive images of themselves to gain positive feedback from others (Hjetland et al., 2022). Self-presentation manifests prominently in online dating with individuals striving to portray idealized online versions of themselves.

Based on their requirements and the self-presentation of others online, older adults build their expectations for offline encounters, continually adjusting based on their experiences. The gap between the expectations people have for their romantic relationships, and their actual relationship dynamics, is a predictor of relationship outcome (Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2017). When offline interactions occur, the reality may not equate, both to their own expectations and how the individual has self-presented online (Whitty, 2008). Unmet relationship expectations can lead to lower relationship satisfaction, commitment, and eventual breakup (Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2017).

Discrepancies in Self-Presentation of Characteristics

In online dating, individuals frequently engage in behaviours that present discrepancies between their online profiles and reality. For instance, women tend to under-

report their weight or use retouched or outdated photos, and men tend to embellish their height, income, and educational background (Hall et al., 2010; Hancock & Toma, 2009; Lo et al., 2013; Toma et al., 2008). In a study of more than 5,000 participants (18-96 years old, 74% female), older online daters (men and women equally) over 50 were more likely to misrepresent their age as younger (Hall et al., 2010). Men were more likely to misrepresent personal interests and attributes, than women. This study has limitations in that it relied on participants' self-reports of their actual physical and behavioural characteristics. In VandeWeerd et al. (2016), older women also reported that deception was widespread in online dating. Participants reported that potential partners lied about their age, weight, and health, and posted misleading pictures from when they were younger or fitter.

Discrepancies in Self-Presentation of Successful Ageing

Discrepancies in self-presentation can also revolve around presenting an image of successful aging, including its components of low probability of disease and disease-related disability, being high functioning and having active engagement with life, even in their absence.

Gewitz-Meydan and Ayalon (2017) assessed 39 global online dating platforms identified through searches using keywords like 'dating sites' combined with terms such as 'older adults/people'. The research concluded that in online dating profile pictures, disabilities, and signs of ageing such as hair loss, wheelchairs, and wrinkles were absent, and factors that indicated health and an active engagement with life, such as photos of older adults being active were included. When Wada et al. (2016) assessed 320 randomly selected Canadian PlentyofFish online dating profiles of older adults (aged 60 to 99), they found low prevalences of participants self-presenting as having a low probability of disease and disease-related disability and being high functioning. However, they found similar results as Gewitz-

Meydan and Ayalon (2017) for active engagement with life. Older adults often employed self-descriptions depicting productiveness in social, paid and volunteer activities, highlighting how their health was optimal and that they were financially comfortable and independent.

Watson and Stelle's study (2021) built on previous research by examining 200 online dating advertisements from older adults aged 60 and above (50% men). Participants referenced ageing by stating perceptions of appearing younger than their actual age or feeling physically and mentally younger, reflecting their desire to self-present as high functioning. As these three studies relied on researchers' subjective classification of dating profiles and personal ads, drawing definitive conclusions may be difficult.

While older adults' profiles may portray components of successful ageing, the reality of how well the profiles meet the criteria for successful ageing differs. For example, Wada et al. (2016) coded online profiles based on whether they indicated that the older adult led a healthy lifestyle. The findings revealed that participants referenced lifestyle choices and activities associated with lower functioning and increased risk of disease and disability, hence only 9.1% of older adults in the study could meet the criteria of successful ageing. However, it is important to note that this study relies on older adults accurately portraying the factors constituting successful aging, as well as the authors' accurate interpretation of them. These findings are supported by McLaughlin et al.'s (2009) research that utilised the US Health and Retirement Study, a longitudinal two-yearly study of US adults, to assess the prevalence of successful ageing in those 65 years and older. The results showed a similar percentage, at most 11.9% of older adults met successful ageing criteria.

Effects of Misrepresentation

When engaging in online dating, deception or misrepresentation has been found to jeopardise the development of an offline relationship (Peng, 2019). Despite the initial fascination with misrepresenting characteristics and successful ageing aspects, honesty remains highly valued in relationships (Peng, 2019). Yet, Peng (2019) found amongst a Chinese sample of participants aged 18 to 55 (52% female) that approximately 83% engaged in some level of deceptive behaviour in their online dating profiles such as misrepresenting physical appearance and rounding off personal details (age, weight, height). The main motivation was that daters sought to attract others by embellishing their profiles.

Similar deceptive behaviours were reported in an earlier Australian study with 60 participants (50% women) aged 23 to 60 years, though fewer participants reported misrepresentations (51%), and referred to these as "exaggerations" (Whitty, 2008). Participants also reported feeling outraged and disappointed when they found out their date had misrepresented themselves when they met in person, perceiving them as dishonest and immoral.

In a study conducted by Sharabi and Caughlin (2018), 94 individuals aged 18 to 63 (73% female) participated in a study regarding online dating deception effects on subsequent offline interactions. The study found that when online daters self-enhanced or misrepresented qualities in online interactions, if potential partners thought they had been deceived during first dates, physical and social attraction declined and there were low expectations for future encounters. This may be due to the relational dynamic and closeness being undermined. Peng et al. (2022) found similar results, with 282 Chinese participants aged 18-64 reporting that misrepresentation in online dating caused participants to experience strong negative emotions and reject the person who deceived them.

The findings of these studies emphasize the importance of honesty in online dating and how breaches in honesty can trigger negative emotions (Peng, 2019; Peng et al., 2022). They also highlight how online daters' self-presentation often conflict with their expectations of others (Peng et al., 2022; Whitty, 2008). The future viability of the relationship is affected by unmet expectations, which are caused by misrepresentation and deception in online dating (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2018). However, due to cultural differences and the younger cohorts in these studies (Peng, 2019; Peng et al., 2022; Sharabi & Caughlin, 2018; Whitty, 2008), the applicability of their findings to older cohorts requires further investigation. These studies indicate that success of online dating relationships can depend on the alignment of online daters' self-presentation expectations and the reality of their experiences.

Gender Roles

Social role theory recognises that men and women assume different socially accepted roles such as financially supporting the family and raising children, respectively (Eagly, 1987). Gender roles emerge from the belief that men and women possess inherent characteristics based on observed behavioural differences (Eagly, 1987). Men are typically expected to initiate interactions, arrange dates, cover expenses, and escort the woman home, all while displaying dominance and assertiveness (Eaton & Rose, 2011). Women are often expected to agree to the man's suggestions, all while exuding a caring and passive manner (Eaton & Rose, 2011). Despite a push towards a more egalitarian process during online dating, gender roles persist in various facets of online dating such as online dating profiles and relationship progression (Eaton & Rose, 2011; McWilliam & Barrett, 2014). This persistence of gender roles can lead to the development of gendered expectations in online dating.

Gendered Expectations

In McWilliam and Barrett's (2014) study, older men constructed profiles portraying traditional masculinity by highlighting engagement in paid work, financial stability and career success. Contrastingly, older women composed youthful images of themselves and expressed a desire for men to maintain high social and physical activity levels. These findings are reflected in Wada et al.'s (2019) study, with older women's online profiles emphasising cheerful attitudes, sociability and caring-for-others nature, and older men emphasising their competency in amassing and maintaining wealth.

Concerning relationship progression, Dickson et al. (2005) interviewed 15 older US women (aged 62 to 79 years) who expressed their desire for companionship and their need for independence when dating, stemming from concerns about potentially assuming caregiving responsibilities and merging finances. While they appreciated traditional gender roles in some respects, such as contact initiation, they were less comfortable with others, such as being picked up, demonstrating the inconsistency of contemporary gender role expectations. This conflict often resulted in some women prioritizing independence, even at the risk of loneliness.

In McWilliams and Barrett's (2014) study, some of these concerns remained relevant, as women felt obligated to become caretakers in relationships, and older men felt entitled to receiving caregiving, an aspect that many women stated their reluctance of when entering new relationships. Older men often contend with shorter life expectancies and higher prevalence of heart disease, contributing to their preference for younger partners who could offer them care and assistance (AIHW, 2023; McWilliam & Barrett, 2014). In Watson and Stelle (2011), single older women were concerned that dating might threaten their independence, considering it a step to marrying and making it a barrier to dating.

For older men, navigating egalitarian narratives and expectations entails striking a delicate balance between their masculinity and the varied desires of women, often leading to conflict. This struggle is caused by entrenched gendered expectations before and during dating. Older women have expectations of being treated as per their traditional gender roles in some instances, stating that they desired a gentleman who 'treated a lady like a lady', but also wish to maintain their independence and distance themselves from other parts of their traditional role (Dickson et al., 2005; Watson & Stelle, 2021). Conversely, older men have expectations of maintaining gender roles in dating and leveraging these norms to gain instrumental support (McWilliam & Barrett, 2014). Though older women claim they have less desire for commitment than men, their online profiles often contradict this (Griffin & Fingerman, 2017; McWilliam & Barrett, 2014).

In dating, conflicts arise when the actual manifestation of gender roles clashes with its evolving nature, creating a struggle between traditional and contemporary gender role expectations. This dissonance between the gendered expectations of older adults and their reality requires further exploration due to lack of research in this area.

The Current Study

Existing literature on online dating for older adults has offered an understanding into their motivations for dating, their preferences for potential partners, how they self-present, how successful ageing and gender roles apply, their expectations going into online dating and some of the realities they experience (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Carr, 2004; McIntosh et al., 2011; McWilliam & Barrett, 2014; VandeWeerd et al., 2016; Wada et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2016; Whitty, 2008). Previous studies also show that a significant majority of online daters admit to deceptive self-presentations (Peng, 2019; Whitty, 2008). However, these studies have primarily focused on US, Canadian or Chinese participants and had

younger samples. These studies have also relied on dating profiles, personal ads, self-reports of self-presentation and how the authors interpreted the information they conveyed. While these methods make data gathering easier, they provide limited details for interpretations and limited avenues for follow-up. Further, previous research is outdated and there is a lack of focus on online dating for older adults or how their expectations of online dating and the reality of their experiences differed, especially regarding gender roles (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2018). Past research has recommended reaching out to older adults and obtaining more descriptive responses regarding the experiences and reality of online dating (Watson & Stelle, 2021).

This study added to the literature of older adults and online dating by investigating the intersection of successful ageing, self-presentation and gender roles in the Australian context. The constructs were chosen due them being interconnected by the expectations they engender in online dating. Informed by previous research recommendations, this study aimed to explore older Australian adults' expectations of online dating versus the reality of their experiences by utilising an inductive approach to qualitative research and reflexive thematic analysis to provide an in-depth analysis of lived experiences to fill the research gap. This study sought to address the following research question:

1. How do the expectations of older Australian adults towards online dating differ from the reality of their experiences?

Chapter 2: Methods

Research Design Overview

This study utilised a qualitative design and a phenomenological approach with an online survey and follow-up interviews. In using a qualitative design, this study collected the experiences of individuals and the impact on their lives resulting in an examination of additional dimensions of social phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A phenomenological approach assisted in revealing older adults' understanding of their own online dating experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Current literature focuses on the experiences of older adults in online dating without emphasising their expectations versus their realities, which made a qualitative research design suited to this study as it facilitated exploration.

Research data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) and a constructivist worldview. A constructivist worldview assisted in the comprehension of the experiences, with the understanding that the same phenomena can elicit a subjective meaning resulting in a complexity of views that researchers can use to extrapolate interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). RTA has a strong alignment with both a phenomenological approach and a constructivist worldview due to it being a philosophically flexible approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). By using this framework to acknowledge that individuals construct their own realities based on the subjective interpretations of their experiences, deep exploration of the research question could occur.

Recruitment and Participants

Approval for this research was granted by the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (UniSQ HREC: ETH2024-0230), in compliance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

Inclusion Criteria

To be eligible for the study, participants had to be aged 60 years or older and either currently engaged in online dating or previously engaged in online dating whilst being 60 years of age or older. Older adults of any sexual orientation, relationship status and using any online dating platform were included.

Recruitment Avenues

Participants were recruited in three ways; firstly, online via social media, secondly, offline via social networks, and thirdly, via local retirement communities. Online posts were made to Facebook groups such as ‘Australia senior dating’ and local groups such as ‘Toowoomba and Surrounds Community Notice board’ (see Appendix A for full list). Online posts included information about the survey and incentives, with a link to the online survey which included more detailed information such as a description of the study including privacy and confidentiality measures taken by the researcher. For the online survey, consent was gained by participants clicking onto the next page. At the end of the survey, participants were given the option of being contacted by the researcher for a follow-up interview by providing their name and phone number to arrange a time to meet either in person, via phone, or over video call. Prior to that meeting, the participation information sheet and consent form for the interview were sent to the participant to sign and return to the researcher either via email or in person.

Participants were also recruited using the social networks of the student researcher and their family, as well as the distribution of recruitment flyers to retirement villages in Toowoomba, Queensland. These flyers were included in newsletters or displayed on village notice boards, providing interested individuals with general details of the study and asking them to contact the researcher for further information. For these last two avenues, these

participants ($n=3$) requested they complete the survey at the same time of the interview with the assistance of the researcher. To support inclusivity of participants this was approved. For these participants, information packs and consent forms were given in person prior to the survey and interview. The information flyer (Appendix B), participant information sheet (Appendix C) and consent form (Appendix D) are provided in the appendices.

Incentives

Participation in the study was voluntary. Incentives were offered in two ways. The first, after completion of the online study, participants were able to enter the UniSQ Psychology Prize Draw to win a prepaid cash card valued at either \$50 or \$100. The Cash Prize Draw is drawn twice-yearly, and winners are notified via email. Second, participants who completed the follow-up interview were eligible for a \$15 Woolworths e-gift card. This was emailed to participants on completion of the interview.

Participants

This study consisted of two components, the online survey and the interview. Using the recommendation from Braun and Clarke (2013), a small-scale qualitative project that includes interactive data collection methods, such as interviews, should have six to ten participants, and participant generated textual data, such as qualitative surveys, should have 15 to 50 participants, to gain sufficient data. Both recommendations were met by this study.

Survey Component. Overall, 32 responses were received for the qualitative survey, with five responses being excluded (as detailed in the Data Analysis section). This meant that the final sample included data from 27 participants aged between 60 and 76. Participants were 15 males aged 60 to 70 ($M = 63.87$), and 12 females, aged 60 to 76 ($M = 64.25$). Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the survey sample.

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of Survey Sample (N=27)*

Characteristic	Category	N	Percentage
Gender	Male	15	55.56
	Female	12	44.44
Age	60-65	23	85.19
	66-70	2	7.40
	71-75	1	3.70
	76	1	3.70
Sexual Orientation	Bisexual	1	3.70
	Heterosexual	24	88.89
	Gay/Lesbian	2	7.41
Current Relationship Status	In a relationship (not living together)	2	7.41
	Married	6	22.22
	Separated (no longer living together)/Divorced	10	14.82
	Single	5	37.04
	Widowed	3	11.11
	Engaged	1	3.70
Experience Online Dating	Currently Online Dating	19	70.37
	Previously engaged in online dating (over the age of 60)	8	29.63

This study also had seven key variables that were generated from the survey responses. The first, participant's self-reported current health status on a scale of 1 to 10, of which 70.38% of participants gave themselves a rating of eight and above ($M = 8.11$, $SD = 1.31$). The second, current medical conditions, of which eight participants (29.63%) listed conditions such as anaphylaxis, arthritis, cataracts, reflux, hiatus hernia, asthma, diabetes, anaemia, heart palpitations, high blood pressure and prostate cancer. The other five variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2*Frequencies of Survey Variables (N=27)*

Variable	Category	N	Percentage
Length of Time Online Dating	Less than 1 year	6	22.22
	1 to 2 years	5	18.52
	2 to 5 years	14	51.86
	More than 10 years	1	3.70

Time Spent Online Dating	More than one hour a day	12	44.44
	One hour a day	6	22.22
	One hour every two days	4	14.82
	One hour a week	3	11.11
	One hour a fortnight	2	7.41
Experience Converting to Offline Interaction	Yes	23	85.19
	No	4	14.82
Whether they will continue online dating*	Yes	20	74.07
	No	5	18.52
Websites used**	eHarmony	11	40.74
	Bumble	4	14.81
	Tinder	4	14.81
	Silver Singles	3	11.11
	PlentyofFish	3	11.11

Note. *Two participants did not respond to this question. **Each participant may have used more than one website, only the top five websites are displayed here.

Interview Component. Of the 27 survey participants, 16 stated their initial consent to be contacted for a follow-up interview. Of those 16, three participants were contactable and agreed to a follow-up interview and 13 participants either provided contact numbers that did not exist, or did not reply to messages and emails sent. A further three of the 27 requested for the survey and interview to be done concurrently. Interview participants were 2 males aged 64 and 70 and 4 females, aged 62 to 76 ($M = 68.5$). Table 3 presents the demographic details of the six interview participants. Two participants chose their pseudonyms (James and CrowdPlzr [CP]), whilst the other four had pseudonyms allocated by the researcher based on popular Australian baby names from the 1950s.

Table 3

Interview Participants' Demographic Data (N= 6)

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Current Relationship Status	Sexual Orientation
James	70	Male	Engaged	Heterosexual
CP	62	Female	Single	Heterosexual

Penelope	62	Female	In a relationship, not living together	Heterosexual
Diana	74	Female	Divorced	Heterosexual
Kevin	64	Male	Single	Heterosexual
Catherine	76	Female	Widowed	Heterosexual

Data Collection

A pilot survey phase was completed with six pseudo-participants from the student researcher's personal networks completing the online survey and giving feedback. This resulted in two questions regarding online dating profiles being adjusted for better clarity. Actual data collection was completed in two phases: the online survey and interviews.

Survey Component

Each participant completed the online survey, either independently or assisted by the researcher (n=3). The online survey had three components. The first collected demographic data such as age, gender, and relationship status. The second, gathered data on the participant's self-described health status and dating behaviours (e.g., sites used, frequency of engagement). The third contained predominantly open-ended questions centred on their motivations for online dating, their preferences in a partner, the online dating profiles they have encountered, the interactions they have taken offline and their experiences with online dating platforms. At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would consent to a follow-up interview, and if so, they were asked to provide their name and phone number. The survey was estimated to take 20 minutes to complete, and participants averaged approximately 32 minutes (ranging from 4 minutes to 3 hours 12 minutes). Appendix E provides a full list of survey questions.

Interview Component

Unstructured interviews were conducted over the phone (n=1), by videoconference (n=1) and in person at mutually agreed upon locations such as a café or the participants home

($n=4$). Interviews began with small talk to build rapport. For those who had already completed the survey online, probes were used to clarify and unpack survey responses in more detail. For those who had not completed the survey online, the survey questions were embedded within the interview, that is, the survey questions were asked by the researcher with clarifying interview questions used to dig deeper into participant answers, enabling a richer and more detailed exploration of participants thoughts, feelings and experiences surrounding online dating.

Interviews were recorded on a smartphone, with the interview time ranging from 29 minutes to 107 minutes ($M = 53$ minutes). This was due to the researcher refining their approach as they conducted more interviews and the first two interviews being conducted at the same time as the surveys. All interviews were conducted between 25th May 2024 and 21st June 2024. One interview (James) was conducted with the participant's partner present as an observer at the request of the participant, however the presence of his partner did not seem to affect his responses.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to assess the data, a process which involves six stages: transcription and clarification of responses, familiarisation and checking of data, coding, generating themes, reviewing and defining themes, final analysis and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This process was chosen as it is a systematic and rigorous method for identifying patterns in qualitative data that is accessible for beginner level researchers.

Stage 1: Transcription and Clarification of Responses

Interview recordings were transcribed using the artificial intelligence platform, Panopto through the UniSQ website. Panopto provided raw, unedited transcription that

required cleaning and checking against the recordings. This was done by the researcher in a Microsoft Word document by listening to the recordings, correcting errors in the transcription, omitting repeated words and nonsensical speech, with care taken to ensure that the meaning of the participants' responses were not altered. Transcripts were de-identified and emailed to the participants for accuracy. Only one participant (Catherine) clarified understanding of her answer to the question, 'Who pays for the date?', by providing further context in an email. No other clarification or changes were required for other participants. As survey data could be provided anonymously, further clarification of survey responses was only received from those participants that agreed to an interview.

Stage 2: Familiarisation and Checking of Data

The researcher used three methods for familiarisation with the dataset: immersion, critically engaging with the data and notetaking (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

For the interview data, the transcription process was used to listen to the recording repeatedly, enabling the researcher to become intimately familiar with the contents of the interviews. The researcher then discussed the transcriptions with their supervisor, comparing interpretations of the contents and answering questions to ensure joint understanding and compiled notes on the interviews for ease of reference. The interview transcripts were then entered into NVivo, a software tool for qualitative data analysis, in readiness for data coding (QSR International, 2023).

For the survey data, the spreadsheet containing all 32 survey responses were downloaded. Survey responses were read repeatedly for full immersion in the data. Responses were then analysed to determine whether bots had been used to answer questions.

Four methods were utilised for internet bot detection. The first, a CAPTCHA⁵ was used at the beginning of the survey to deter bot responses, but this is only regarded as being moderately effective (Storozuk et al., 2020). The second, whether there were multiple responses with similar start and end times, of which there were none (Storozuk et al., 2020). The third, whether duplicate responses occurred, of which there was one respondent who completed the survey twice providing different answers each time, excluding their data from the survey. The fourth, whether there were nonsensical responses. While some responses fit this fourth criteria, these appeared at random across respondents and were attributed to be regular variations that occur in human responses.

Each survey response was then analysed to determine whether they met the criteria for the study (one did not meet age criteria). Each response was analysed to confirm they had completed at least 75% (determined in agreement with supervisor) of the open-ended survey questions. Two did not meet this criterion and were excluded from the study. Based on these methods, a total of five responses did not fulfil the requirements and were excluded from the study, leaving 27 responses remaining. The researcher then conferred with their supervisor to confirm the accuracy of these exclusions. After checking the survey responses, they were then also entered into NVivo. The researcher then made notes, which coupled with the repeated data analysis required for internet bot detection led to further familiarisation with the data.

Stage 3: Coding

The coding process used was inductive, whereby the researcher allowed the data to guide code generation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher began with coding survey

⁵ Completely Automated Public Turing tests to tell Computer and Humans Apart (CAPTCHA), a type of test to determine whether the user is human (Storozuk et al., 2020).

responses and interview transcripts separately, before comparing the codes generated from survey responses for cross validation and correlation in interview data. The data were coded in both a semantic and latent manner, meaning that both explicitly and implicitly expressed meanings of the data were captured as appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The entire process of coding of the whole dataset was also discussed with the researcher's supervisor, whereby time was spent conferring to confirm consensus and the supervisor also co-coded two transcripts to validate generated codes. Codes generated in NVivo were then migrated to data tables in Microsoft Word to ready for the next step in the process.

Stage 4: Generating Themes

Generating themes is the process of finding patterns in codes unified by a general organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Using a table, shared patterns across codes were assessed and an overarching theme was generated. Theme and subtheme generation centred around relevancy to research question and constructs described in the literature review, and frequency of presentation. Due to the vastness of the data, and in support of data integrity, this process required the researcher to confer with their supervisor multiple times to ensure subjectivity was not compromised.

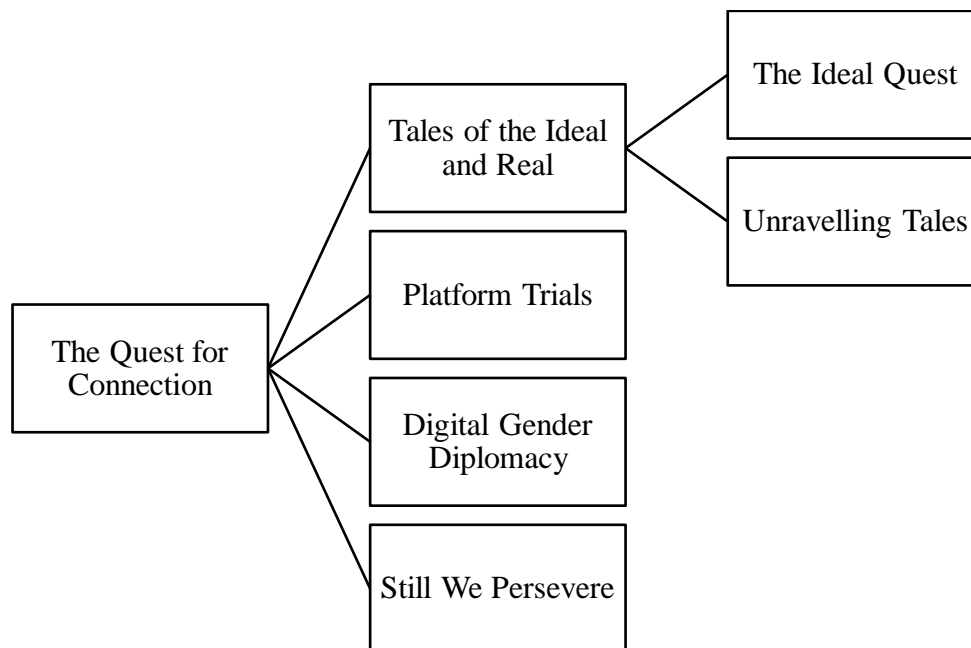
Stage 5: Reviewing and Defining Themes

Themes and subthemes were continuously re-organised and re-arranged during this process. Each theme and subtheme was checked to see if they adequately represented the codes they were derived from and to confirm that no new themes were present in the data. A final theme meeting was conducted with the research supervisor where themes and subthemes were reviewed to assess adherence to the research question and were refined based on

inherent patterns in the data. Following this meeting, themes were finalised into a thematic map as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Thematic Map Presenting Themes and Subthemes



Stage 6: Final Analysis and Write-Up

In the final analysis, quotes from participants' responses were used to illustrate and support themes and subthemes, providing evidence to address the research question. This analysis is presented in Chapter 3: Findings.

Rigour

Ensuring rigour is a critical component for qualitative research design and this study enacted several protocols (Johnson et al., 2020). Firstly, a pilot study was used to refine survey questions. Data saturation was achieved by meeting guidelines established by Braun and Clarke (2013) regarding sample sizes. Follow-up interviews helped expand and validate survey responses. Member checking occurred where the interview transcripts were emailed to participants for clarification, completeness, and accuracy (Johnson et al., 2020). The thesis

supervisor co-coded two interviews for validity and a richer insight. Using the NVivo software to code data also assisted in identifying any errors in coding (Johnson et al., 2020). Bot detection measures ensured data integrity (Storozuk et al., 2020). The researcher and the supervisor discussed themes together multiple times for shared understanding and agreement. Quotes were used as supporting evidence for the findings. Lastly, reflexivity was undertaken to recognise and understand researcher biases (Johnson et al., 2020).

Reflexivity

The recognition of reflexivity is fundamental to the RTA process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Understanding how the researchers' biases, experiences and interpretations are inherent in the methodologies will assist in maintaining the transparency of the study (Johnson et al., 2020).

During reflexivity, the characteristics of the researcher should be considered. At the time of writing this, I am a 27-year-old African student who is the child of immigrants. From the moment I began this journey, I felt a generational and cultural divide. Coming from a more conservative culture, my views on older adults and online dating was geared towards more traditional forms of courtship and less towards casual dating. At times, I found myself being challenged by my ageist views, cultural background and the biases that shaped my views on older adults and dating. Overcoming these views involved recognising that older adults, like everyone else, have various reasons for engaging in online dating and embracing this understanding has assisted in my personal growth.

Prior to this thesis, I did not personally know any older adults who dated or online dated. Despite this, I was aware of the online dating climate and the struggles faced by single people. Some of these struggles were reflected in the interviews I had with participants of this study. Especially with the women, with whom I was able to build rapport and identify with

their concerns, triumphs, and experiences. Participating in these interviews and reading survey responses made me feel a sense of duty to accurately report the findings and adhere to the spirit of participants' responses.

To deal with bias mitigation, I used both survey and interview data to validate responses. I also discussed my findings and interpretations with my supervisor, so that alternative perspectives could arise. I clearly documented my research process for transparency. I also joined older adults online dating Facebook groups so that I could see the online dating environment and read first-hand accounts. I attempted to remain objective in interviews by maintaining neutral body language and behaviour.

This entire experience has given me an insight into an aspect of older adults' experiences that I have not thought about before and helped me further develop skills of unconditional positive regard and empathy. As my engagement with participants' stories grew, honouring their perspectives in my thesis became paramount.

Chapter 3: Findings

This study aimed to explore older Australian adults' expectations of online dating versus the reality of their experiences. RTA generated four main themes inclusive of two subthemes. The first theme was Tales of the Ideal and Real with subthemes of The Ideal Quest and Unravelling Tales. The second, third and fourth themes were Platform Trials, Digital Gender Diplomacy and Still We Persevere, all having no subthemes. All themes, save one, were generated from survey data with interviews providing greater depth for subtheme development. Platform Trials was generated from interview data, and later found to be present in survey data, as the interview setting allowed for greater understanding of its significance. Each main theme was constructed to examine the expectation versus reality of various facets of older adults online dating experience.

The overarching narrative for the findings was the notion of online dating being a quest. Those commencing this quest had expectations to find a genuine connection. This quest was marked by the search for the ideal amid the reality of the tales spun by potential partners, navigating the challenges of platform performance and safety, negotiating between traditional and modern gender roles, and remaining steadfast in their quest due to various motivations, culminating in personal growth. Table 4 provides a summary of the findings including the themes, subthemes, and an overview of their contents.

Table 4*Summary of Findings Generated Through RTA*

Themes	Subthemes	Example Quote	Overview
Tales of the Ideal and Real	The Ideal Quest	“Christian, kind, caring, able to communicate, honest, trustworthy.” (James)	Outlining the various criteria and expectations when seeking a partner online.
	Unravelling Tales	“I would say perhaps only one of them exaggerated her weight being a little lower by about five kilos.” (James)	Discrepancies and deceptiveness encountered when online personas and real-life encounters converged.
Platform Trials		“They keep sending me messages. Oh, new matches, new matches. But they're the same people that they told me about six months, 12 months, 18 months ago.” (Catherine)	Challenges related to the performance, value and safety of platforms and the security measures used.
Digital Gender Diplomacy		“At this time of life, I expect that he's probably going to be an old-fashioned gentleman. And he'll offer to pay.” (Catherine)	Evolving roles and expectations between genders in online dating interactions.
Still We Persevere		“No, my expectations are still the same. Why would I lower my expectations? You know I still want the same thing.” (Diana)	The experiences and growth gained through navigating the complexities of online dating and the enduring nature of motivations.

Theme 1: Tales of the Ideal and Real

This theme explored the challenges older adults encountered when navigating the gap between the idealised traits that they sought in their potential partners and the reality of their interactions. The first subtheme, The Ideal Quest, explored how older adults composed a list of desired traits and characteristics of potential partners reflecting their practical considerations and causing expectations to develop. The second subtheme, Unravelling Tales, detailed how older adults navigated these expectations when converting online interactions to offline interactions, by unravelling misrepresented profiles and interactions. Overall, this theme highlights the tension between older adults' expectations in online dating and their reality, revealing the ongoing struggle of converting the ideal to the real.

Subtheme: The Ideal Quest

In online dating, older adults consistently expressed they desired attributes for potential partners in three areas: health, physical characteristics, and personality traits, reflecting their own values and considerations. Other traits also mentioned by participants were shared interests, ethnicity preferences, want for sexual intimacy and potential partner's geographical proximity, religiousness, and financial independence.

The health of potential partners was a crucial factor for partner selection with survey respondents expressing desires for partners who were "nonsmokers" and "active" indicating that active lifestyle maintenance was dependent on a partner's physical engagement and overall health. Interviews investigated these preferences deeper, with Catherine and Kevin's requirements of a mobile partner reflecting practical considerations for lifestyle compatibility. Catherine's statement that a partner using a walking stick was "probably past what I'm looking for", despite her own previous experience of using a walking stick, revealed a possible conflict between her experiences and societal ideals that value being disability free.

Similarly, Kevin's view that someone "who's older may not be able to keep up" with his level of activity despite his current cancer diagnosis was also inconsistent with his view of ageing and suggested age-related stereotypes associating ageing with diminished physical capability and overall decline. Participants also stated their need for a partner who could participate in meaningful activities outside of the home, with Catherine desiring someone who had a "sense of adventure" and could travel with her. CP desired someone who could engage in social activities such as "ballroom dancing, volleyball", and "rock and roll dancing".

Physical characteristics were also present in partner selection considerations. Male respondents emphasised the importance of physical attractiveness in women, while female respondents cited "height" as a requirement for their potential partners. In interviews, CP and Penelope preferred partners to be physically fit, active and "not overweight". These preferences suggested that participants equated these desired physical characteristics with an active lifestyle and good quality of life and wellbeing, using this as criteria in partner selection to ensure that compatibility is met.

Survey responders expressed desires for partners who displayed personality traits of "communication" and "empathy" skills, "emotional intelligence" and "compassion". In her interview, Penelope further highlighted the importance of compassion, kindness, and a willingness to help others, and intertwining these traits in people who "are just full of love". Participants appeared to understand, value, and consider emotional compatibility as a necessity, as much as physical compatibility.

Additionally, survey responders expressed desires for honesty in two forms: as a criterion, "honesty and being an open book", and an expectation "honest profiles tend to lead to more satisfying initial interactions, as there are fewer discrepancies between expectation

and reality”. These responses illustrated older adults want for genuine representations in the online sphere, utilising transparency as a method to avoid future disappointments. Kevin further explained in his interview that “if you're going to be on there, be honest”, describing how dishonesty can “reduce the level of trust” and indicated deceitfulness in the potential partner. This emphasis on honesty was especially important as older adults transitioned from online to offline interactions.

Overall, older adults desired their potential partners to have attributes that reflected their own values and practical considerations, related to three main areas: health, physical characteristics, and personality traits. These characteristics were crucial as they linked to quality of life and emotional and lifestyle compatibility. Honesty was also emphasised as it reduced the gap in expectations between online and offline interactions. These attributes highlighted the expectations that older adults formed even before their offline relationship began.

Subtheme: Unravelling Tales

Once participants met an online partner that satisfied their requirements, they proceeded to offline interactions. That is when they unravelled the tales spun by their potential partners, leading to discrepancies from reality. The most frequently cited inconsistencies were interaction discrepancies, profile discrepancies and health discrepancies.

Interaction discrepancies refer to deviations between observed online personality portrayals and actual offline personality. For example, James explained that while a prospective partner self-described as “bright and bubbly” online, her offline persona greatly differed. CP further detailed how potential daters stated their intentions were to “get to know you” during dates, but in reality, “they sit on their phone the whole time, their obviously not

interested”. This deviation between daters behaviour online and the reality of offline interactions led to unmet expectations for older adults.

Profile discrepancies are the online misrepresentations of motivations, photos, physical appearance, and relationship status. With motivations, CP noted that while men stated that they desired “companionship”, in reality dates were a precursor to “a one-night stand”. Diana also echoed this, describing male online daters as “deviates”, emphasising the gender-specific motivation discrepancies that can impact online dating practices.

Survey responders detailed how “most people use photos of themselves as younger people” as they were “lying about their age”. Kevin further explained how far this misrepresentation went when a prospective partner used an 11-year-old photo on her profile, which Kevin only discovered when they met. Online daters’ tendency to maintain long-term commitment to misrepresentation affects the trustworthiness of online photos.

Survey participants also described further discrepancies in age, height, and weight. In a follow-up interview, James recounted one potential partner’s rationale for misrepresenting her age, with her stating: “I put that age on the site, because I found I wasn't getting any hits”. This justification for profile alteration emphasises the desire of online daters to tailor their profiles to the feedback from the dating market and prioritise this over authentic self-presentation. This pattern is not just limited to age discrepancies, Diana described how a prospective partner listed his divorced status, but when asked he stated “well, I'm not actually divorced yet”, possibly cognisant of how others would view him.

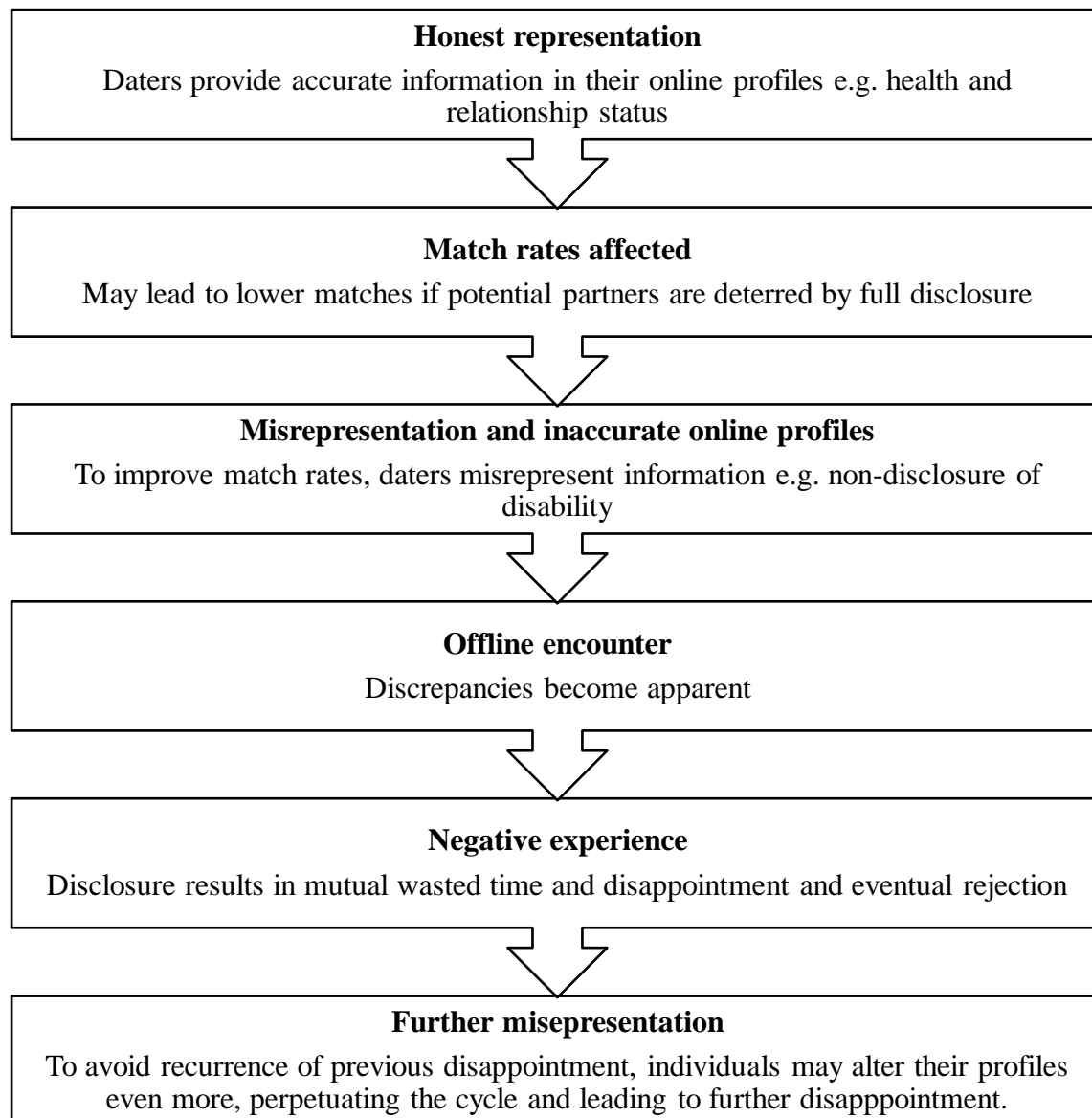
However, it was during discussions of health discrepancies that the motivations behind daters attempts to cater to the market became clearer. Penelope and CP described their experiences with male daters who used mobility aids and were “chair bound”, respectively, when their online profiles made no mention of their disabilities, reflecting daters’ reluctance

to initial disclosure. Kevin described accounts of two different daters he encountered: one who disclosed their disability online leading to him “swiping left” (rejecting) her profile, and another who misrepresented her health issues and activity level, leading to him rejecting her in person. Kevin hypothesised how the second dater may have felt “disenfranchised” by the lack of matches she might have received by disclosing her disabilities upfront, leading to her misrepresentation. Kevin’s comments suggested that initial honesty in online dating can be a path to misrepresentation, as exhibited in Figure 2. Catherine’s experience illustrated this path, viewing online dating as a feedback loop where she felt compelled to constantly adjust her profile to meet other people’s expectations, having not found a partner since she began online dating 18 months prior: “If what I’m saying about myself isn’t ticking boxes for somebody else ... I need to change it”. Overall, these discrepancies supported the notion that older adults are modifying their online profiles to meet market demand and conform to societal expectations, rather than maintaining authenticity, leading to unmet expectations.

While these instances highlighted the challenges of dealing with misrepresentation online, both survey and interview participants have stated that there had been instances where participants have self-presented accurately, specifically in the areas of occupation, age, personality, and eye colour. However, as participants’ misrepresentation experiences exceeded accurate ones, the need to verify the authenticity of potential partners may have contributed to a common principle identified in interviews: participants’ desire to shift quickly from online to offline conversions. James explained the tangibility that offline meetings provided: “Suddenly you’ve got somebody you can touch, and hold, and see the way they walk, and move, and the gestures”.

Figure 2

The Path to Online Dating Misrepresentation for Older Adults



In summary, once older adults found a potential partner that supposedly met their requirements and expectations, they proceeded to the reality of offline interactions, where the discrepancies unravelled. Interaction discrepancies are deviations in online versus offline behaviour. Profile discrepancies are variances in the profile components of older adults. Health discrepancies are occurrences where online and offline health differs. These behaviours can create a path to misrepresentation where honesty may not seem in older adults' best interests in the short term. However, over the long-term, dishonesty can lead to

instances of disappointment and time wastage. Participants also desired to meet their potential partner quickly to verify profiles.

Theme 2: Cyber Trials

This theme explored the online dating platform performance, value and security expectations older adults began their journey with, including their development of safety measures, versus their actual reality. This theme also considered whether platforms met the needs of older adults.

Survey respondents had expectations regarding platform performance, anticipating user-friendly navigation and effective matching algorithms. Catherine and CP found their expectations unmet, either due to difficulties understanding the website's layout or locating certain features. Platforms also displayed the same matches (as seen in Catherine's quote in Table 4) or listed matches outside of their filters. For instance, Kevin and Catherine received matches outside their location filters and Diana received matches outside her age filters set from 65 to 85 years old, questioning "how come this 23-year-old keeps coming up?".

Platform value was also of concern for participants, with platforms initially conveying that they were free. In reality, Diana and Kevin explained how dating sites lure you in and then "funnel you into a subscription" model. These practices surrounding performance and value can engender daters mistrust, with James describing it as "frustrating", highlighting the need for greater platform transparency.

Participants also began online dating with various security expectations, with responders stating that they had concerns in two areas: user security (security against the platforms) and platforms security measures. For user security, Diana noted that platforms clearly stated users' information would be used for marketing purposes and that certain platforms were "notorious for stealing" personal information but "there's not a lot you can do

about it because you've got to use it to do any searching". This suggested that while participants were aware of how platforms use their data, providing the websites with their information was inextricably tied to them using the websites effectively.

Survey responders had "expectations around the platform's ability to verify user identities". In reality, both Diana and James agreed that scammers were widespread throughout online dating platforms. Survey respondents also described how fake "profiles are borrowed from social media pages" and "some were men pretending to be women", with Kevin agreeing that platforms generated profiles that were inauthentic. Evidently, participants entered online dating with security expectations, only to be met with the disappointing reality of deception and fraud.

Participants adopted security measures in response to these trials. When James became suspicious of a potential dates gender, he described his tactics to ward off potential money scams: "You'd be chatting. So they say I'm sitting here having a cup of coffee. So am I... send me a photo. You don't get a photo of them having a cup of coffee because it's a guy". Diana's description of a harrowing encounter where a dater harassed her on a date explains why older women often adopt measures to ensure their personal safety such as using an online pseudonym, never meeting during nighttime, scoping the meeting place ahead of time and never revealing their address online. Participants had increasing awareness of their vulnerability and safety online, and the necessity of these measures in mitigating their risk.

In summary, older adults commenced their trials with expectations surrounding performance and security of dating platforms, however they encountered threats to their security and adopted measures in response. This discrepancy in older adults' experiences underscored a gap between their expectations and actual platform performance, value, and

security, indicating platforms inability to meet older adults needs, which may require reassessment of their effectiveness.

Theme 3: Digital Gender Diplomacy

As older adults navigated online dating, among the trials they experienced in their quest is their adherence to, or departure from, traditional gender norms. This theme details the expectations and realities of traditional gender roles and modern shifts to these roles that impacted online dating for older adults.

Older women had expectations of older men being a “gentleman”, with Catherine considering “honesty”, clear statement of intentions and adherence to personal boundaries important components but being unable to test these expectations due to lacking offline interactions since her recent widowhood. CP explained her desire for “romance” such as flowers to precede sexual intimacy, and her preference for tall men, which she associated with feeling “protected”. However, she reported that her dates displayed none of these gentlemanly behaviours, revealing a discrepancy between traditional ideals and norms and the current reality of online dating. Expectations of gentlemanlike behaviour also extended to the payment of dates, with Catherine, Diana and CP all expressing the desire for the man to offer payment. This reinforces the traditional male roles of being both a gentleman and a provider. In one particular instance, CP described how one date “booked a room and he said, well, I’m not paying for dinner if I’m not going to get anything in return”, which is in direct conflict with those two aspects and resembled modern dating practices.

For older men, traditional gender roles are reflected in their initial motivations for online dating, with multiple male survey participants seeking a “wife”. In interviews, James elaborated further on this ideal:

I think society in general tends to swing back to the old-fashioned values of a homemaker. A woman being a homemaker and the man being a provider. And in the Christian church we talk about the man as being the umbrella who supports and protects and cares for the family, and the woman nurtures and raises the children.

James's comments reinforced the role of males as providers and women as nurturers, reflected in his views that he should pay for the date. His comments also provided an explanation for his preference for Asian women, describing their genteel nature more suited to traditional gender roles and seemingly more attractive than the assertive manner of Western women.

Older women were also navigating their evolving roles. For instance, once Catherine develops an offline relationship, she expects them to maintain separate households and eschews marriage or anyone who requires assistance with mobility or decision making, stating, "I've been a carer for years. I don't want to be a carer in the near future", having been one previously for her deceased husband. This need for independence by older women may pose challenges for them in the Australian online dating scene. James also identified that older women desired younger men, a view which Diana supported as she had no desire to provide physical support for men her age due to caregiving concerns.

Diana also detailed her experiences managing older men's expectations of, and desire for, women with no "baggage" such as children. Providing the male perspective, James described an instance where a potential partners' prior child-related responsibilities led to breakup as "she wasn't prepared to get married for another five years". The experiences of these older adults indicate how female familial responsibilities and caregiving duties are in direct conflict with the roles that men are requiring them to fill, becoming obstacles for women in the dating market.

Overall, older women's expectations of gentlemanly behaviour and romantic gestures, and their avoidance of their traditional role, were in conflict with older men's desires for long-term relationships and desire for female adherence to traditional gender roles. These experiences create a barrier to relationship development.

Theme 4: Still We Persevere

In their quest for meaningful relationships online, older adults experienced the challenges of managing online misrepresentation by potential partners, platform deficiencies and gendered expectations. Nonetheless, older adults remained resilient and persevered in their quest. This theme will examine the motivations that drive older adults to continue pursuing meaningful relationships and their reflections.

Older adults' motivations for online dating included a desire for companionship and sexual intimacy, and the need to combat loneliness and boredom. These desires were pervasive among both survey responders and interviewees alike and reflected a need for social connections as a critical aspect of emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction. However, once engaged in online dating, older adults experienced feelings of mistrust, cynicism, and disappointment, highlighted in James's reflection regarding online misrepresentation:

You're almost disappointed that somebody is doing that. Really? Is that what this is? How this is going to go? You kind of have that attitude of you just wasted my time. It's just been a pointless waste of how many hours, and neither of us have achieved anything from it.

CP expressed similar feelings of cynicism and wariness, describing how online dating was "a cheaters game" and that she thought "there must be something wrong" with her. While both James and CP's comments reflected a sense of disillusionment with the process, this is where their stories diverged. CP's experience was amongst a minority of participants

whose experience had a deeper emotional impact, which eventually led to her withdrawing from online dating. In contrast, James embodied resilience despite his initial frustrations, leading to his self-growth. He used his previous unsuccessful attempts to improve his self-presentation, became more skilled at analysing other's profiles and diversified his approach by exploring the Asian dating market. Diana's resoluteness mirrored this determination, with her having high standards despite the challenges she has faced in her own online dating journey, reflecting "No, my expectations are still the same. Why would I lower my expectations? You know I still want the same thing". Eventually, James's perseverance and commitment to finding a partner led him to his current fiancé, stating "Don't give up. You're going to have a hundred failures. And that's probably on the light side. 500 failures [but] the people that are successful in this... they have real perseverance". James and Diana's comments highlight the indispensability of resilience in navigating the challenges of online dating.

These underlying motivations provide an understanding of why, despite the negative experiences, the majority (74%) of participants stated that they would continue online dating. Motivated by their desire for companionship and to alleviate their feelings of boredom and loneliness, older adults remain "more determined to have a partner", as stated by survey respondents. In interviews, Catherine further revealed her optimism that the "right person is out there", while Diana and Penelope felt encouraged by the positive experiences of friends and family members, inspiring hope in their own online dating journey.

In summary, though older adults navigated significant challenges in their online dating journey, their underlying motivations heavily influence their continued perseverance. This perseverance, despite disillusionments and setbacks, can translate into eventual success. It is these experiences that inspire hope and exhibit their determination and resilience.

Chapter 4: Discussion

With the prevalence of older adults using online dating for attaining meaningful connections, understanding their experiences become crucial due to its impact on their wellbeing (Jordan, 2023). Previous research on this topic is minimal and requires updating. By using a qualitative survey design with follow-up interviews, these findings added to the literature of older adults and online dating in the Australian context. Specifically, this study answered the question of: How do the expectations of older Australian adults towards online dating differ from the reality of their experiences?

All themes were reviewed using the constructs of successful ageing, self-presentation, and gender roles in the Australian context. This chapter provides a discussion on the findings and summarises the main points. The implications, strengths, limitations, and recommendations for future research are also presented.

Similar to existing literature, the findings showed that older adults entered online dating with a list of preferred traits related to health status, physical characteristics, and personality traits that they desired their potential partner to fulfil, forming their online dating expectations (Whitty, 2008). Rowe and Kahn's (1997) principles of successful ageing are crucial to these expectations as they offer insight into older adults' pursuit of successful ageing in romantic relationships and their motivation of achieving it for a higher quality of life. In this study older adults desired partners who embodied successful ageing's three components: low probability of disease and disease-related disability, being high functioning and having an active engagement with life.

Participants prioritised partners who were in good health and autonomous, and therefore had a low probability of disease and disease related disability (McWilliam & Barrett, 2014). They desired partners who displayed honesty, empathy, compassion, kindness

and emotional intelligence, all fundamental to being high functioning. Older adults also pursued partners who would engage in shared interests and social activities outside of the home, demonstrating a commitment to maintaining active engagement with life (McWilliam & Barrett, 2014). Moreover, they continually expressed a desire to avoid those that were inactive, physically unfit and had limited mobility and unhealthy habits such as smoking. While these findings support Gewitz-Meydan and Ayalon (2017) and Watson and Stelle (2021), who demonstrated that older adults' online profiles reflected components successful ageing, they also illustrate that older adults seek these components in potential partners *and* actively avoid those that do not qualify. Older adults likely pursue these traits in others to enhance or maintain their own active lifestyle and reduce potential disruption to their lives caused by their partners disability or poor health, lessening their caregiving burden and lifestyle misalignment (McIntosh et al., 2011).

Older adults were also selective about the height, weight, and level of attractiveness of their partner. This supports the findings of McIntosh (2011) who theorised that older adults may be influenced by their own experiences that have led to them having expectations of the qualities needed for a successful relationship. In particular, older men desired physically attractive partners which may be associated with a desire to display masculine success as posited by McWilliam and Barrett (2014). Personality traits such as compassion, kindness, helpfulness, empathy, communication skills and emotional intelligence were of importance to older adults, reflecting their desire for a supportive relationship. Additionally, this study found that older adults desired their partners to have shared interests and religion, have ethnicity preferences and financial independence, require sexual intimacy, and live in proximity. This confirms the findings of McIntosh et al. (2011), proving it applicable 13 years later, and relevant to an Australian cohort.

Despite these expectations, older adults encountered misrepresentation online across all three desired traits of health status, physical characteristics, and personality traits (Hall et al., 2010; Hancock & Toma, 2009; Peng, 2019; Toma et al., 2008; VandeWeerd et al., 2016; Whitty, 2008). This finding bolsters past research conclusions and offers insight on the older demographic as previous studies lacked focus on this age group. Additionally, participants revealed discrepancies in profile components such as relationship status and motivations for engaging in online dating. Misrepresentation in online profiles regarding these components can lead to mismatched expectations.

What distinguishes these findings is the new perspective on the path to online dating misrepresentation, which may begin with older adults providing full disclosure online. Should this full disclosure include attributes linked to unsuccessful ageing or undesired traits, this may deter potential partners. In pursuit of higher match rates, and as a possible coping mechanism for the emotional toll of the rejection, older adults may knowingly or inadvertently misrepresent information about themselves (Hall et al., 2010; Hancock & Toma, 2009; Toma et al., 2008; VandeWeerd et al., 2016). However, misrepresentation undermines the authenticity of the online interaction and leads to unmet expectations. In the short term, dishonesty may seem beneficial but in the long-term, when discrepancies become apparent, it may result in wasted time, disappointment, and eventual rejection (Peng, 2019; Peng et al., 2022; Sharabi & Caughlin, 2018). Even if the potential partner accepts the misrepresentation, any discrepancies may lead to long term relationship impairment and poor relationship satisfaction due to incompatibility (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2017). To avoid rejection, daters may either further alter their profiles, perpetuating the cycle, or become more honest in their online self-portrayal, both prospects that may lead to further rejection, impacting their self-esteem and willingness to continue (Whitty, 2008).

This creates a difficult situation for older adults, with daters similarly rejecting partners who either misrepresented successful ageing *or* honestly disclosed their disabilities. In reality, the percentage of older adults who could actually meet the criteria of successful ageing was less than 15%, making it impractical (McLaughlin et al., 2009; Wada et al., 2016). This contrasted with the current study, where the majority of participants rated their health positively and only a third disclosed chronic health conditions. This may indicate that participants see health as a fluid concept rather than physical limitations or diagnoses. It may also indicate a possible overestimation of personal health among participants, which is a distinct possibility, as one participant disclosed his current battle with cancer but still rated his overall health as eight out of ten. Despite their possible flexible definition of self-health, participants continued to reject those partners who fell short of these idealised standards, which may stem from a discrepancy between the high value placed on successful ageing and how rare it actually is (McLaughlin et al., 2009). This difference between ideals and actual realities in online dating highlights the need for further investigation into how views on successful ageing influence relationship preferences, set unrealistic expectations and reinforce stereotypes.

Misalignments between expectation and reality are further perpetuated by the online dating platforms themselves. Older adults began online dating with expectations surrounding platform performance, value, and security. However, issues related to platform functionality and security derailed these expectations. In this study, older adults reported encountering scams and fake profiles and while none have admitted to falling prey to these manipulations, it supports previous reports and studies that indicated the prevalence of these deceptive online dating practices (ACCC, 2019; Buchanan & Whitty, 2014). Older adults also became savvy with regards to protecting their data from the platforms themselves. In response to these

challenges, older adults adapted coping strategies, such as limiting the information they reveal online. Older women in particular were proactive in enacting online and offline safety measures, such as using a pseudonym online or never meeting during nighttime, explicitly aware of their vulnerability in in-person meetings due to concerning past encounters (VandeWeerd et al., 2016).

In a bid to improve online dating safety for Australians, the federal government has introduced a new code in July 2024 in agreement with the online dating industry focusing on harm detection, content moderation, improving reporting mechanisms and providing support resources for online daters and avenues for account termination (Ministers for the Department of Social Services, 2024). It also aims to improve law enforcement engagement for imminent online safety threats. While this code is set to be administered by an oversight body, it relies on online dating platforms enacting and complying with the code for true effectiveness.

The findings also highlighted the conflict between traditional role expectations and modern online dating practices. Older women expected gentlemanly behaviour from men but encountered the opposite (Watson & Stelle, 2021). Older men sought long-term relationships and partners who fulfilled the role of traditional femininity yet met older women who prioritised independence and avoided caregiving roles (McWilliam & Barrett, 2014; Watson & Stelle, 2021). Older women desired to avoid caregiving responsibilities by seeking younger partners (McWilliam & Barrett, 2014). They also navigated older men's desires for partners without familial responsibilities, an unrealistic expectation. The experiences of the participants of this study indicated mismatch of older men and older women's desires and expectations in relationships, creating a significant barrier for relationships and echoing previous studies (Dickson et al., 2005; Watson & Stelle, 2011). This discord also suggests a need for revaluation of terms such as gentlemanly behaviour and femininity in the modern

era. While older adults can respond to these conflicts with negotiations, the current discord created by these conflicts creates disappointment and impacts their online dating experiences.

The current study also found that older adult's primary motivation for engaging in online dating was a desire for companionship, echoing previous studies (Watson & Stelle, 2011; McWilliam & Barrett, 2014). Sexual intimacy was also present as a motivator, defying traditional views that ageing lessens desires for sexual activity and supporting studies that highlight its importance in maintaining meaningful connections (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Carr, 2004; Watson et al., 2016). However, in contrast to the findings of Watson and Stelle (2011) and McWilliam and Barrett (2014), loneliness and boredom were found to be consistent secondary motivators amongst participants. This aligned with Harris's (2022) findings, which found that older adults were experiencing increased feelings of loneliness and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. As this current study was conducted in 2024, it appears that the feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction with older adults' current social environment may still be present post pandemic, despite restrictions being lifted in 2022 (Parliament of Australia, 2023).

These discrepancies between expectation and reality in online dating for older adults engendered feelings of betrayal, self-doubt, disappointment, and disillusionment, reflecting the findings of Peng et al. (2022) and Whitty (2008). As a result, a minority of older adults may withdraw from online dating. However, the majority of older adults would still continue due to the importance of achieving social connections for emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction (Jordan, 2023). Older adults also utilised the online dating platforms feedback loop to improve their own profiles, demonstrating their self-growth and resilience in the face of challenges, qualities fundamental to their wellbeing (Trică et al., 2024). Older adults'

experiences emphasise the importance of resiliency and perseverance in the online dating journey, which can lead to eventual success.

Summary and Implications

This study has five main findings that have theoretical and practical implications on the online dating industry and government health messaging.

Firstly, older adults enter online dating with expectations related to the health, physical characteristics, and personality traits of their potential partner. These preferences are formed based on the principles of successful ageing, their personal experiences, practical needs and their desire for health and lifestyle compatibility. In particular, online daters highly value successful ageing in their potential partners, which has implications for older adults who cannot meet these components as it can lead to decreased relationship opportunities and reinforce ageist stereotypes. A broader understanding of desirable traits that reduce stigma and unrealistic expectations around ageing is required. This narrative shift should occur at the government level, with public health messaging regarding successful ageing highlighting the importance of psychosocial wellbeing and attributes such as emotional resilience and wisdom. Those that do not meet traditional successful ageing criteria stand to benefit the most from this.

Secondly, older adults continually experience discrepancies between others self-presentation online and their actual selves, leading to mismatched expectations and disappointment. This can undermine trust, impair the relationship and lead to its dissolution. A possible reason for this misrepresentation could be that their initial full disclosure led to rejection. Further exploration into the extent that individuals are willing to misrepresent online for acceptance, and the potential costs to their self-esteem should be considered.

The feedback mechanisms of online dating platforms may be contributing to misrepresentation. This can be alleviated by platforms providing more constructive and actionable insights into users' profiles, enhancing algorithms that match users on these desired traits and providing educational resources regarding providing accurate self-presentation. There should also be verification processes regarding critical components of online dating profiles, such as photos, to lessen instances of discrepancy. In providing these functions, online dating websites can market themselves as user honesty focused, differentiating them from other sites.

Third, older adults face challenges related to the performance, safety, and security of online dating platforms, and when meeting their online dates in person. They are aware of these challenges and enact safety measures in response. The federal government in partnership with the platforms have also both enacted safety measures to protect online daters. These security measures should be continually improved and monitored by both parties. Education could also be provided by government services and platforms that normalise online dating, explain its risks and encourage older adults to report threats to their online and offline safety.

Fourth, traditional gender roles often are in conflict with modern online dating practices. Though both older men and women expect each other to fulfil certain aspects of traditional gender roles when dating, there is still a mismatch in these expectations which creates a barrier to relationship formation. This indicates a disconnect between gender roles and current online dating practices, with older adults attempting to straddle both.

And finally, despite these challenges, the majority of older adults continue to online date due to strong motivations such as companionship. This resilience reflects the importance

of social connections in older age and can inform theories on resilience in the face of adversity.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study presented three key strengths. The first strength is the use of a qualitative study with two points of data collection. The survey component identified patterns amongst participants and the follow-up interview allowed deeper and more nuanced exploration, and expansion of initial survey responses. In conjunction, both methods allowed cross-validation of the findings, enhancing reliability.

Another strength is the gender split of the sample. Many of the studies cited in the literature review focused on female experiences in online dating, possibly due to older men being unwilling to share their experiences. In this study, there was a slight majority of male participants which enabled the capturing of diverse online dating perspectives and filled a research gap. This also allowed for enhanced exploration of gender roles and its impact on the online dating experience.

The final strength is the use of the constructs of self-presentation, successful ageing and gender roles to explore online dating expectations versus reality. Each of these constructs provided unique contributions to already existing literature, with all constructs being interconnected by the expectations they engender in online dating. Understanding how desires for successful ageing, pressures to self-present and the impact of gender roles interact can help increase this understanding.

This study presented two key limitations. The first limitations is that while the researcher made all attempts to collect data from Australian participants only, the online survey had an open format and was not locked to international participants. This may affect the generalisability of the findings to the Australian context. Due to participants providing

erroneous phone numbers, this limited the number of follow-up interviews in comparison to initial interest. Geographically targeted advertising was conducted using local community boards in an effort to lessen this. Future research could benefit from employing internet protocol (IP) address filters to restrict access to participants outside of Australia and assist with bot identification. This was not enacted in this study as it may impact anonymity.

The second limitation is that this study did not ask questions about participants own misrepresentation in their self-portrayals. This is relevant as the majority of participants identified misrepresentation in others as a significant issue but did not organically disclose any themselves. Hence, the understanding of the discrepancy between perceived and actual behaviour is not captured. However, this was not the focus of this study, thus future research could benefit from a quantitative study comparing participants actual characteristics, their online profiles and the misrepresentation they encounter online. This can lead to a better understanding of self-perception, online self-presentation, and perception of others' behaviours in online dating.

This study also offers other avenues for future research. Further quantitative research in partnership with online dating platforms could examine how the platforms' feedback loop contribute to misrepresentation. This could be done by tracking changes in daters profiles and any feedback-based adjustments they make. It is probable that the greater exposure daters have to feedback, the greater the pressure to conform to platform expectations. More in depth interviews could also assist in examining the psychological motivations for misrepresentation. By adopting an open-minded approach, older adults can expand further on their motivations, which may lead to the development of recurrent themes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis extended on existing literature regarding older adults online dating expectations versus the reality of experiences to an Australian cohort. This study also emphasised the relevance of self-presentation, successful ageing, and gender roles in the online dating context, whilst also offering theory implications and recommendations for enhancement of online dating platforms user experience and government public health messaging. Finally, this study shows that despite the challenges and unmet expectations that older adults face when online dating, their resilience and perseverance remains, illustrating a hopeful nature in the face of adversity.

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Appendix A

Facebook Groups Used for Data Collection

Group Name	Link
Toowoomba Community notice board	https://www.facebook.com/groups/615832229440097/
Toowoomba Community Page	https://www.facebook.com/groups/360074911945474/
Toowoomba Community Notice Board	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1488780578013893/
Australia senior dating	https://www.facebook.com/groups/260607920617868/
AUSTRALIAN DATING SITE	https://www.facebook.com/groups/262866223474098/
Australian, Papua new Guinean & Pacific islanders dating site	https://www.facebook.com/groups/864194497810127/
Toowoomba and Surrounds Community Notice board	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1050108375759498/
Highfields and Surrounds community page	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1240945569586024/
SENIOR DATING SITE OVER 30, 40, 50, 60 AND 70	https://www.facebook.com/groups/343275790547119/

Appendix B

Research Project Flyer



Older Adults Online Dating Expectation VS Reality



The University of Southern Queensland is conducting a study examining older adults and online dating. Older Australian adults **(aged 60 years of age and older) who are currently online dating or have experiences of online dating after 60** are invited to participate in a voluntary online survey that is expected to take 20 minutes, with the possibility of a follow-up interview with the researcher. Alternatively, participants can opt for a direct interview with the researcher. All participants will be able to enter the UniSQ Psychology Prize Draw to win a prepaid cash card valued at either **\$50 or \$100**. Participants who take part in a follow-up interview will receive a **\$15 e-gift card**.

To participate or receive further information, please copy this link: <https://surveys.unisq.edu.au/index.php/822169?lang=en> or contact the student researcher:

Ms Feven Berhanu


Email: U1082547@umail.usq.edu.au

Phone: **0413 941 328**

This research is being conducted by students as part of an Honours project for the Bachelor of Psychology (Honours).

Appendix C

Participation Information Sheet

 University of Southern Queensland	University of Southern Queensland Participant Information Sheet Interview
UniSQ HREC Approval number: ETH2024-0230	

Project Title

Swipe right: Older adults experiences and attitudes with online dating.

Research team contact details

Principal Investigator Details

Dr Sonya Winterbotham
Email: sonya.winterbotham@unisq.edu.au
Telephone: +61 7 4631 1177

Co-investigator details

Ms Feven Berhanu
Email: u1082547@umail.unisq.edu.au

Description

This project is being undertaken as part of an Honours project (Bachelor of science/Bachelor of Psychology), through the University of Southern Queensland.

The purpose of this project is to gain further understanding of older Australian adults attitudes towards, and experiences with online dating platforms. This may include how older adults present themselves in this space, associated benefits or identified risks, beliefs regarding pace and shape of older adult relationships. As Australia's ageing demographic grows it is important to explore your experiences to understand the benefits and barriers to fostering romantic relationships in older age, and to ensure online dating platforms develop as "age-friendly" communities.

Participation

Your participation will involve partaking in a brief interview that will take approximately 30 minutes of your time. The date and location of the interview will be determined between you and the student researcher to ensure a mutually agreeable time/location is identified. Interviews may take place over the phone if you should choose to participate via phone interview.

Questions will expand on your survey responses, for example:

- Can you share further information regarding differences you experienced between expectations of people online versus when you met in person?
- In your online survey you mentioned (XX), can you expand on how this met your expectations?

The interview will be recorded on an audio recording device. The audio of the interview will be transcribed and you will be sent a copy of the transcript with an opportunity to provide further clarification and information in addition to your original responses. The audio recording and subsequent transcript will be kept confidential with any identifiable data obtained from the interview removed before publication of research so you (or others you might mention) may not be personally identified. Due to the nature of the study, and analysis of data, anyone who does not wish to be audio recorded will not be able to participate in the study.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. You will be unable to withdraw data collected about yourself after the data has been analysed.

If you do wish to withdraw from this project or withdraw data collected about yourself, please contact the Research Team (contact details at the top of this form).

Your decision whether you take part, do not take part, or take part and then withdraw, will in no way impact your current or future relationship with the University of Southern Queensland.

Expected benefits

It is expected that this project may directly benefit you. You will be offered a \$15 gift card as a thank you for your time participating in the follow up interview.

Additionally, this project may benefit other adults by identifying factors that influence online dating for older adults. Your responses may also help identify key factors required to ensure online dating platforms can be "age-friendly" communities.

Risks

In participating in the interview there are minimal risks such as, time imposition. We will ensure your interview runs to the agreed upon schedule and if you do need to take a break at any time or wish to terminate the interview due to time imposition you can do so.

You may also be concerned about your involvement in this research and existing relationships with organisations or individuals who advertised the research project. The researchers will work with you to ensure confidentiality.

Sometimes thinking about the sorts of issues raised in the interview can create some uncomfortable or distressing feelings. If you need to talk to someone about this immediately, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14. You may also wish to consider consulting your General Practitioner (GP) for additional support.

Privacy and confidentiality

All comments and responses are confidential unless required by law.

Whilst the interview will be audio recorded, you should feel free to express your opinions and views openly and honestly in the interview. Any identifying information provided will be removed at the time of transcription to ensure anonymity and protect confidentiality. This includes your name and any other names that you may provide in your answers. Consent forms and transcripts will be given a matching code (e.g., SR_2024_P1) which will allow the research team only to match you with your transcript.

Professional transcription services using AI technology will have access to the recordings for the purposes of transcription only. Only the research team identified above will have access to the non-identifiable transcripts for the purposes of analysis. You will receive a copy of your transcript for review prior to the analysis. The time frame given to participants to review and request any changes to the transcript before analysis will be a minimum of 1 week (7 days).

Non-identifiable data may be used for future research purposes following appropriate ethical approvals; however your anonymity will be safeguarded. As data files will be stored as non-identifiable you will not be able to withdraw your data from any future research use.

Participants may request a copy of the project summary from the research team. Requests can be made via email or telephone (see contact details on page 1 of this document).

Any data collected as a part of this project will be stored securely, as per University of Southern Queensland's Research Data and Primary Materials Management Procedure.

Consent to participate

We would like to ask you to sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate in this project. Please return your signed consent form to a member of the Research team prior to participating in your interview.

Questions

Please refer to the Research team contact details at the top of the form to have any questions answered or to request further information about this project.


Concerns or complaints

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project, you may contact the University of Southern Queensland, Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics on +61 7 4631 1839 or email researchintegrity@usq.edu.au. The Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics is not connected with the research project and can address your concern in an unbiased manner.

Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project. Please keep this document for your information.

Appendix D

Consent Form

University of Southern Queensland	
	Consent form Interview
UniSQ HREC Approval number: ETH2024-0230	
Project Title	
Swipe right: Older adults experiences and attitudes with online dating.	
Research team contact details	
Principal Investigator Details	Co-investigator details
Dr Sonya Winterbotham Email: sonya.winterbotham@usq.edu.au Telephone: +61 7 4631 1177	Ms Feven Berhanu Email: u1082547@uemail.unisq.edu.au
Statement of consent	
By signing below, you are indicating that you:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Have read and understood the information document regarding this project.Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.Understand that if you have any additional questions, you can contact the research team.Are over 18 years of age.Understand that any data collected may be used in future research activitiesUnderstand that the interview will be audio recordedAgree to participate in the project.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Yes / <input type="checkbox"/> No<input type="checkbox"/> Yes / <input type="checkbox"/> No<input type="checkbox"/> Yes / <input type="checkbox"/> No<input type="checkbox"/> Yes / <input type="checkbox"/> No<input type="checkbox"/> Yes / <input type="checkbox"/> No<input type="checkbox"/> Yes / <input type="checkbox"/> No<input type="checkbox"/> Yes / <input type="checkbox"/> No
Name (first & last)	
Signature	Date

Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project.
Please return this document to a research team member before undertaking the questionnaire.

Appendix E**Online Survey Questions**

No	Question	Possible Answers
Inclusion Criteria		
1	Are you over 60 years old and have experiences with online dating?	“Yes”, “No”. With “No” leading the participant out of the survey
Demographics		
2	What is your age?	Open answer
3	What is your gender?	Open answer
4	What is your employment status?	Employed full-time Employed part-time Volunteer Retired, not working Looking for work
5	Sexual Orientation	Gay/Lesbian Bisexual Heterosexual/Straight
6	What is your current relationship status?	In a relationship (not living together) Divorced Married Separated (no longer living together) Single Widowed Engaged De facto relationship (in a relationship, living together)
7	What was your relationship status prior to your current one?	In a relationship (not living together) Divorced Married Separated (no longer living together) Single Widowed Engaged De facto relationship (in a relationship, living together)
Health		

8	On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 equals poor health and 10 equals excellent health, how would you describe your current health status?	1 to 10
9	Do you have any ongoing health issues (e.g. diabetes, heart condition)?	Yes, No
10	If yes, please list them below:	Open answer
Online Dating Basics		
11	Which of the following best describes your experience with online dating after the age of 60?	Currently engaged Previously engaged (after the age 60) but not now
12	(Depending on the answer to question 11) How long have you been online dating? Or In your most recent experience, for how long did you engage in online dating for?	Fewer than 6 months 6 months to 1 year 1 to 2 years 2 to 3 years 3 to 4 years 4 to 5 years 5 to 10 years More than 10 years
13	What online dating platforms have you used, or are currently using? (e.g. Silver Singles, eHarmony)	Open answer
14	(Depending on the answer to question 11) How much time do you spend on online dating sites? (Choose the closest estimate) or How much time did you spend on online dating sites? (Choose the closest estimate)	More than one hour a day One hour a day One hour every two days One hour a week One hour a fortnight One hour a month Less than one hour a month
Online Dating Motivations		
15	What motivated you to try online dating?	Open answer
16	What expectations of online dating did you have prior to beginning it?	Open answer
17	How have your expectations of online dating changed over time?	Open answer
Online Dating Preferences		
18	What criteria do you have when choosing a partner?	Open answer
19	In what ways have your criteria for a partner changed over time?	Open answer
Online Dating Profiles		
20	In what ways have your expectations of other people's online dating profiles been met? (e.g. they were the same height as the height listed on their profile)	Open answer
21	In what ways have your expectations of other people's online dating profiles differed? (e.g. they were shorter than the height listed on their profile)	Open answer
Online Dating Interactions		
22	Have you had experiences with taking an online interaction offline?	Yes, No

23	If yes, how has the offline/in-person interaction with that person/s differed from the online interaction?	Open answer
24	What interactions with potential partners who you have met online stand out? Please describe why they have stood out for you.	Open answer
<hr/>		
Online Dating Platforms		
25	What were your expectations of the online dating platforms you have been using before you started dating? Consider things like cost, matching algorithms, security, design, navigation, and demographics of the user base.	Open answer
26	How have these expectations differed from the reality of your experiences?	Open answer
27	How have these differences changed the way you approach online dating?	Open answer
28	Do you intend to continue engaging in online dating?	Yes, No
29	If no, why not?	Open answer
<hr/>		
Follow-Up		
30	Would you be willing to be contacted via phone or video conference for a brief follow-up interview regarding any of the responses you have provided in this survey? Should you participate, you will be eligible for a \$15 e-gift card.	Yes, No
31	If yes, what is your name?	Open answer
32	What is your best contact phone number?	Open answer