Older Adults Navigating Trust, Safety, and Privacy in Online Dating

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Older adults are increasingly using online dating, but this comes with safety and privacy risks. To understand how they manage these challenges, we interviewed 31 adults aged 60-85. Our thematic analysis identified four main themes representing stages of online dating: deciding to date online, creating a profile, evaluating profiles, and deepening a connection. Participants were aware of risks, adapted their approaches, and viewed trust as fragile and something to be earned over time. They also faced frustrations with platform issues such as the prevalence of fraudulent or inactive accounts and the difficulty of deleting profiles. We compare their experiences to the literature on younger adults and highlight ways to better support older online daters.

Older adults, Privacy, Online dating

1. INTRODUCTION

Older adults actively date to find companionship and intimacy, which has a positive impact on combating loneliness, increasing social activity, and positively impacting their health (Wang et al. 2018). They may face a higher risk of social isolation because of retirement, lower mobility, or loss of loved ones. As a result, they may feel too limited or insecure to engage in activities where they could meet potential dates. To increase their dating pool, counteract aging limitations, and dictate the pace of re-entering the dating scene, older adults increasingly turn to online dating (McWilliams and Barrett 2014).

Although online dating offers many potential benefits, it may also carry significant safety and privacy risks. Traditional advice for using social networks, such as being cautious with friend requests from strangers, avoiding sharing personal information, or restricting profile visibility, is at odds with the purpose of online dating, as adhering to such guidelines could undermine the very purpose of joining an online dating platform.

The sensitive and personal nature of online dating makes privacy paramount. Users must manage privacy in relation to both other users and the platform itself. Creating profiles and disclosing intimate information to make romantic connections can expose them to malicious exploitation (Couch et al. 2012), while platforms' collection and storage of sensitive personal data increases the risk of data breaches (Hayes and Snow 2018). At the same time, users must navigate the reality that, despite the personal nature of finding a partner, online dating is a public activity.

Despite older adults' increasing participation in online dating and the associated risks, research on their privacy and safety experiences remains limited. The most recent work has primarily focused on technical aspects (Noah et al. 2024a,b). At the same time, broader research on older adults' security, safety, and privacy has examined general social networking platforms (Wang et al. 2018), assistive technologies (Shankar et al. 2012), or general online safety measures (Frik et al. 2019), rather than online dating.

To address this research gap, we conducted a qualitative study to answer the research question: *"How do older adults experience and manage privacy and safety in online dating?"* Through semi-structured interviews with 31 older adults, we identified four main themes corresponding to stages of online dating (Deciding to Date: Reducing Stress and Risk, Creating a Profile: Managing Self-Disclosure and Presentability, Evaluating Profiles: Becoming a Trust Detective, and Deepening a Connection: Trust in Growing Relationships) that shape their privacy and safety management. Overall, participants were aware of the risks of online dating and began with skepticism, often defaulting

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to distrust. The social benefits often outweighed risks, and they found safety and privacy benefits in dating online. They had established strategies for remaining wary while seeking companionship, and were constantly learning, reflecting on, and evolving these strategies through engagement in the activity itself.

2. BACKGROUND

In this section, we review the literature on key areas relevant to online dating, older adults, and the intersection with safety and privacy.

2.1. Older Adults and Online Dating

Contrary to common assumptions, many older adults actively pursue romantic relationships. Dating can reduce loneliness, improve self-confidence, support sexual expression, social engagement, and contribute to physical and psychological well-being, all of which are associated with successful aging (Bulcroft and O'Connor 1986; Gewirtz-Meydan et al. 2023; Wang et al. 2018). However, older adults often face barriers to finding partners. Retirement, health concerns, widowhood, and divorce can shrink social networks and increase social isolation (Wada et al. 2019; Griffin and Fingerman 2018).

Online dating has become an important way for older adults to overcome these barriers by expanding their dating pool beyond their immediate social circles (McWilliams and Barrett 2014; Wada et al. 2019; Harris 2024; Fatima et al. 2024). By 2023, approximately one-quarter of U.S. adults aged 50 and older had used online dating, including 13% of those aged 65 and older (Faverio and Sidoti 2023). This trend is also reflected in industry reports identifying adults aged 50 and older as the fastest-growing demographic on Match.com (Match.com 2024).

2.2. Online Dating Safety and Privacy Risks

Despite its benefits, online dating carries safety and privacy risks. Romance scams, a form of cybercrime that exploits victims' trust for financial gain, are particularly prevalent in online dating and often targeted at older adults (Whitty and Buchanan 2016; Greisman 2021). Scammers typically create fake profiles using stolen photos, cultivate trust through frequent communication and declarations of love, and eventually fabricate crises to solicit money from victims (Rege 2009; Aborisade et al. 2024).

Dating platforms themselves may also constitute a risk to privacy. Many platforms often collect extensive personal information and may share it with third parties for purposes such as advertising, marketing, and analytics (Hayes and Snow 2018).

Safety and privacy risks intersect in location-based dating apps that continuously collect and share users' locations (Fitzpatrick et al. 2015; Lutz and Ranzini 2017). Although these platforms typically do not reveal exact locations, attackers can still infer them through techniques such as trilateration (Feltz 2015). Such vulnerabilities can also expose sensitive side-channel information, as seen during the 2016 Rio Olympics, when Grindr profiles shared on social media revealed some athletes' sexual orientation, placing those from countries where homosexuality was criminalized or heavily stigmatized at risk (The Sun 2016).

2.3. Online Dating Behavior and Perceived Risks

Dating and forming romantic connections require vulnerability and the disclosure of intimate information, creating opportunities for exploitation. This reflects a broader tension: although dating is generally considered private, online dating is inherently public.

According to Nissenbaum's Contextual Integrity Theory (2010), privacy is not about secrecy or control over data, but on whether information flows appropriately within its social context. For example, users expect their profiles to be shared with other people seeking relationships, not with unrelated audiences or third parties. In online dating, a tension also arises wherein the user may desire privacy for themselves, but wishes to discern the true nature of a potential partner (and eventually, share their own).

2.3.1. Younger Adults

Younger adults are frequent users of dating apps, with Tinder[1] being the most popular choice among them (Vogels and McClain 2023). Online dating has become a normalized part of their dating culture and is used to find romantic or casual sexual relationships, as well as for entertainment, curiosity, and social interaction (McPherson et al. 2025).

When creating a profile, younger adults are strategic in crafting a favorable image of themselves, negotiating between appearing attractive and genuine. As they are more often engaged with swiping apps that encourage rapid decisions, they are concerned with creating an appealing first impression to avoid being rejected too quickly (Hobbs et al. 2017). Their profiles often emphasize physical attractiveness, sexuality, personal achievements, and individual interests (Davis and Fingerman 2016).

[1] https://tinder.com

Research on users' perceptions of safety and privacy risks in online dating has identified concerns among younger adults about deception (e.g., misleading photos and inaccurate relationship statuses), sexual risks (e.g., sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and sexual violence), and emotional and physical safety, particularly rejection and meeting strangers in person (Obada-Obieh et al. 2017; Couch et al. 2012). Online dating has also been associated with higher rates of sexual assault and sexually transmitted infections (Büyükeren et al. 2026).

To mitigate risks, younger users verify potential dates through search engines and social media (Gibbs et al. 2011), use voice or video calls before meeting (Obada-Obieh et al. 2017), limit or falsify personal information in their profiles, delay sharing sensitive details, and arrange first meetings in public places (Obada-Obieh et al. 2017; Couch et al. 2012).

2.3.2. Older Adults

Online dating has not always been part of older adults' dating culture. Instead, older adults have increasingly adopted online dating due to its perceived benefits. They are also less likely to adopt platforms such as Tinder (Vogels and McClain 2023). When creating a profile, they aim to reflect cultural expectations of successful aging and attractiveness (Stewart et al. 2016). They commonly portray themselves as active, healthy, optimistic, socially engaged, and trustworthy, projecting a youthful identity to counter age-related stereotypes (Wada et al. 2019; McWilliams and Barrett 2014).

Despite older adults' growing adoption of online dating platforms, limited work has explored their safety and privacy experiences when dating online. Recent work by Noah et al. (2024a; 2024b) analyzed popular dating applications, focusing on older adults, and found that platforms both collect extensive personal information and request broad device permissions, practices that may increase risks.

Given that safety and privacy concerns significantly impact older adults' adoption of new technologies (Peek et al. 2016; Schomakers and Ziefle 2019), understanding their specific concerns and protective strategies in the context of online dating is crucial for helping them benefit from these platforms safely.

3. METHOD

To explore older adults' safety and privacy experiences with online dating, we conducted a qualitative interview study. Given the limited prior research in this area, we adopted an exploratory approach and employed semi-structured interviews.

3.1. Procedure

The study comprised two parts: a questionnaire and a one-on-one semi-structured interview conducted by the lead researcher. The questionnaire collected demographic information and participants' general online dating experience.

Interviews explored participants' online dating experiences, including their goals, profile creation, safety and privacy concerns, and strategies for protecting themselves online. We followed a semi-structured interview approach, allowing us to probe emerging topics and adapt questions based on participants' responses.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Participants received a US$40 honorarium upon completion. The study was reviewed and approved by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board (CUREB).

3.2. AI Use Statement

Trint[2] was used for interview transcription, and Grammarly[3] was used for spelling and grammar checks during the writing process.

3.3. Recruitment

We recruited 34 participants aged 60 or older who had experience with online dating and were fluent in English. Participation was limited to residents of the United States and Canada because these countries share aspects of media, dating culture, and colonial history. At the same time, we acknowledge important cultural differences within and between them.

Recruitment and data collection were conducted online to reach a broader pool of participants. Because eligible participants necessarily had experience using online dating platforms, we did not expect this approach to limit participation substantially. Participants were recruited through social media (Reddit and Facebook), Prolific, and an email distributed through the funding agency's participant mailing list. Of the 31 participants included in the analysis, 21 were recruited through Prolific, 5 through Reddit, and 5 through the mailing list.

Although we initially anticipated that older adults with online dating experience would be difficult to recruit, interest exceeded expectations. We reached theoretical saturation after approximately 25 interviews but completed remaining interviews that had already been scheduled.

[2] https://trint.com
[3] https://app.grammarly.com

To ensure data quality, we reviewed questionnaire responses for bot activity before interviews. During interviews, participants were asked to enable their cameras, and we compared their accounts with their questionnaire responses. Three interviews were excluded due to inconsistencies and irregular response patterns, leaving 31 interviews for analysis.

3.4. Analysis

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis to analyze our qualitative interview data (Braun and Clarke 2022). We followed an inductive process in our initial coding, assigning codes grounded directly in the participant responses. Following that initial coding, the authors met to refine and group the codebook into themes. At this stage, we conducted extensive discussions about older adults' online dating experiences to contextualize their privacy concerns and protective strategies.

While we did not measure coding reliability (Byrne 2022), the results were regularly reviewed and discussed with the research supervisor to refine coding categories and ensure a thorough extraction of meaning from the data.

3.5. Participants

We analyzed data from a total of 31 participants aged between 60 and 84 (*med = 67*). Of these, 19 (61%) identified as women and 12 (39%) as men. Among them, only 2 (6%) explicitly identified as homosexual. 26 (84%) participants lived in the United States, while 5 (16%) participants lived in Canada. 16 (52%) participants were retired, whereas 15 (48%) were employed.

Participants were generally well educated: 2 (6.5%) had completed high school, 7 (22.6%) had completed trade school, 13 (41.9%) held a university degree, and 9 (29.0%) held a graduate degree. Most participants perceived themselves as financially comfortable. They were also experienced with online dating: 14 (45%) reported more than two years of online dating experience, and 27 (87%) had met in person someone they had initially met online.

Participants generally used traditional dating websites rather than newer smartphone-based applications. Although many had explored multiple platforms, 17 (55%) had used Match.com, and 14 (45%) had used Plenty of Fish. Most participants (93.6%) primarily accessed these services using a desktop computer rather than a smartphone.

4. RESULTS

Our thematic analysis indicated that the privacy and safety needs and considerations of older adults dating online were not static but rather context-dependent. We identified four main themes that reflect stages of online dating (deciding to date online, creating a profile, evaluating profiles, and deepening a connection). Depending on individual dating experiences and preferences, these stages may occur simultaneously, in sequence, or iteratively, moving back and forth over time. We describe the elements surrounding each stage and the privacy and safety themes that emerged below.

4.1. Theme 1: Deciding to Date Online: Reducing Stress and Risk

In our interviews, the decision to begin dating online represented an important point at which participants weighed the potential benefits against concerns about privacy and safety. Their decisions were influenced by their wish to find companionship and the degree of control they expected to have over their personal information, self-presentation, and interactions with others. This finding is very consistent with prior work about older adults and online dating (McWilliams and Barrett 2014; Harris 2023; Wada et al. 2019)

4.1.1. Dating at Their Own Pace

The low-pressure and accessible nature of online dating was a strong motivator for older adults. Participants described it as offering a gradual reintroduction to dating. It provided them access to a broader pool of potential partners they might not otherwise have met, while allowing them to control the pace of interactions and the disclosure of personal information. This was particularly important for those who had experienced widowhood or divorce and felt insecure and exposed in traditional dating venues.

> "My husband passed away in 2016, and I decided life was not over, even though I missed him. We were married for 47 years, and I just decided I wanted to go online (. . .) I said, I can talk to people, and if I don't like what's going on, I can just tell them to get lost or something" P4(F, 76)

Physical intimacy also emerged as a privacy consideration when deciding to date online. Participants appreciated the possibility of establishing trust and becoming acquainted with a potential partner before meeting in person or having any chance for physical intimacy.

> "I haven't dated for many, many years. I would really have to know somebody really well because intimacy at this age is scary to me." P31 (F, 73)

4.1.2. Managing Risk Through Platform Control

Unlike in-person dating, online dating allows users to control what personal information they share, filter

potential matches, block other users, and remove their profiles at any time. These affordances gave participants a greater sense of control over their interactions, reducing the perceived risks.

> "I was surprised to realize that it's lower risk than I think people suspect because you don't use your real name, and there are no identifiers or locators unless you decide to provide them." P31 (F, 73)

4.1.3. Keeping Dating Private

For many participants, a key advantage of online dating was the ability to keep their dating activities private from family, friends, and other acquaintances. Many felt self-conscious about dating and were aware of the common misconception that older adults no longer seek romantic relationships. Family members were a particular source of privacy concerns, with participants describing their reactions as dismissive, unsupportive, or overly protective.

> "I told my family once because I thought they should know, and they went absolutely crazy. So I decided that's something I will keep to myself." P5 (F, 67)

Participants also described other reasons for keeping their online dating activities private. For example, P6 (F, 71) chose not to tell her closest friends because many of them were in poor health, explaining that she "just felt sort of weird about it."

Still, women in our study were more likely to discuss their experiences with friends who were also dating online. As P10 (F, 67) explained, "A lot of my friends have used online dating too. And so if there's something kind of funny and really weird that happened, we'll exchange stories." In contrast, male participants in our interviews did not report sharing their online dating experiences with others.

Although participants were selective in disclosing that they were dating online, they generally felt that the likelihood of family, friends, or acquaintances discovering their profiles was low. They attributed this to the structure of online dating platforms, where viewing another person's profile typically requires having a profile oneself. As one participant explained, "If they are going to see mine, then that means they're probably out there too." P10 (F, 67). This sense of reassurance was even stronger for platforms that required a paid subscription, as P14(M, 69) remarked, "I don't think they would be paying just to find me."

Concerns about online dating platforms collecting personal data played only a minor role in participants' privacy considerations. Many viewed such data collection as an unavoidable aspect of digital life, as reflected by one participant's remark: "Facebook has my data. Everyone has my data. It's just another app that tracks my life." P3 (F, 61)

4.1.4. Assessing Safety Risks

Our participants distinguished between physical, emotional, and financial safety risks. Physical safety was generally perceived as a relatively minor concern. Men did not believe they were at risk of physical harm. When considering physical safety risks, they were more concerned for the women. P1 (M, 62) observed, "I think it's easier for guys than it is for women because guys don't have to be as careful as women do." Interestingly, women similarly felt unconcerned, as they believed that, compared to when they were younger, they were less likely to be targets of physical violence.

> "I may be wrong, but I'm not very worried about meeting older men. At my age, I feel like I'm out of the danger zone." P3 (F, 61)

Instead, women were concerned about their emotional safety: "I don't often fear for my safety (. . .) it's more about my emotional safety." P18 (F, 66).

An exception was observed among our two participants who identified as homosexual (2/31), whom carefully weighed the risks of online dating because they feared being targeted for physical violence.

> "You have to be really careful with what you share. You don't want to share anything that could reveal your location. I've heard stories where people have been robbed or beaten up because they figured out where they were." P22 (M, 62)

Financial safety was the most prominent concern. Participants approached online dating with skepticism, believing that older adults were attractive targets for financial exploitation because of their pensions or retirement savings. Romance scams were widely recognized before participants even began dating online and were reinforced through their subsequent experiences of being online.

> "They go on those sites, especially the senior sites, because they figure these people are already retired, and they've got some money, and it's time to cash in." P4 (F, 76)

4.2. Theme 2: Creating a Profile: Managing Self-Disclosure with Presentability

Crafting a profile was central to the experience of online dating, and participants described a complex set of privacy considerations when presenting themselves online. Privacy was not just about what they wished to conceal, but also what they wished to share.

4.2.1. Balancing Self-Presentation and Privacy

The information participants included in their profiles was carefully selected to project a healthy and independent lifestyle.

> "I usually tell them that I don't want anybody to have them take care of me and tell them I worked for my company for 30 some years and still working." P9 (F, 64)

Activities, interests, and hobbies were used not only to represent their personalities but also to demonstrate that they remained either physically or cognitively active and to attract partners with similar interests.

> "You want to put down things that you enjoy. Like, I like motorcycles, I like hiking, and I like camping and and things like that. You want to add stuff like that hoping you might find somebody that enjoys the same things you do." P15 (F,67)

Profile photos played an equally important role in communicating this identity. Participants selected images that portrayed them as physically attractive, youthful, active, and engaged in meaningful activities. They also emphasized using recent photos, recognizing how quickly they could become outdated and concerned that older photos might lead others to perceive them as deceptive.

> "I was horseback riding a lot. So there was probably one where I was sitting on a horse and one where I was in a kayak (. . .) I find that those pictures get outdated very quickly. If you're on it for a couple of years or something, people are going to say, 'Well, that picture's from two years ago.'" P10 (F, 67)

While gender did not appear to influence participants' views on what information was appropriate to share, sexual orientation did. Homosexual participants (2/31) reported not including profile photos and instead relying solely on written descriptions.

> "I don't have a picture on there because there are a lot of people on it, and I know some of my coworkers would be on there. Some people know what I'm doing, and some people don't. So it's just to keep it private." P22 (M, 62)

To balance self-presentation with privacy, participants avoided sharing identifiers or information that could be used to identify or search them online, such as their last name, email address, or phone number. Specific information such as previous school or employer names were also avoided.

> "I wouldn't put my last name or anything that's really identifying, or maybe even the schools I went to—maybe just one of them or something. But I keep it vague enough so that someone couldn't figure out who I am with the information." P12 (M, 60)

4.2.2. Managing Age Disclosure

Age was a frequent source of insecurity during profile creation. Participants worried that potential partners would dismiss them based on their age. Although only two participants admitted to misrepresenting their age, many described feeling self-conscious about it and were concerned that it would lead others to reject them for this matter alone.

> "There was this man that I was very interested in. [. . .] We switched over to regular email, and at that time, I had my full name on my email. And of course, he looked me up and discovered that I had altered my age or lied. I think I made myself six years younger. I tried to help myself. I'm not someone who lies, so it was specifically to try to give myself a chance. He severed ties with me instantly. And I was just heartbroken." P27 (F, 69)

4.3. Theme 3: Evaluating a Profile: Becoming a Trust Detective

Many of the factors participants considered when creating their own profiles also shaped how they evaluated others' profiles and decided whom to message. As profile evaluators, they often adopted a cynical stance, treating the process like detective work and looking for inconsistencies that might indicate deception. Rather than trusting profile information, they searched for "green flags" that increased confidence in a potential match. As P15 (F, 67) explained, "I don't trust them" because other users "could say whatever they want."

4.3.1. Tension between Self-Presentation Freedom and Misrepresentation

Online dating afforded participants considerable freedom in how they presented themselves. At the same time, participants recognized that this same flexibility was available to everyone else.

> "As long as you're online, you can be anyone you want to be. [. . .] But of course, that works both ways. They can also be anybody they want to be." P15 (F, 67)

4.3.2. Reading Between the Lines

In our interviews, participants reported "reading between the lines" when evaluating profiles. Beyond explicit profile information, they assessed subtle cues such as writing style, language use, and consistency (i.e reporting higher education led them to expect strong writing skills). They were alert to details of concern such as someone who seems too good to be true, lack of photos or unrealistic photos, distant locations, poor grammar, younger people, or implausible levels of detail (oversharing).

> "I once saw a man who was extremely attractive. I mean, he was hot! He looked like a model. Checking,

> I found that the picture was, in fact, from a model. I mean, if a person looks so out of your league, you've got to suspect something! It was definitely a scam." P3 (F, 61)

Participants described evaluating profiles as detective work. They used profile cues to search online to verify details such as age, occupation, education, and identity. They were also attentive to outdated photos and inconsistencies that could indicate the other person was misrepresenting themselves. These verification strategies remained important throughout the other dating stages.

> "I was corresponding with a woman who said she was 66, and she gave a fake name but then used her real name in a text and mentioned one of the organizations where she was a board member. So, I was like, okay, I've got a first name, a location, and the name of the organization. Through internet searches, I found her photos and discovered that she wasn't 66, she was 76." P14 (M, 69)

4.3.3. Conflict of Interest with the Platform

In addition to evaluating individual profiles, participants identified challenges at the platform level. Many reported encountering "ghost accounts" (i.e., inactive accounts that appeared active) and fraudulent profiles, while perceiving that platforms provided insufficient support for identifying or managing these issues.

> "It's not that they're not a real person. It looks like it's someone whose profile has been revived from a previous membership, maybe from 20 years ago. You get emails saying this person is absolutely perfect for you, but when you check their profile, it doesn't show when they were last online. The profile might say they're 52 years old, but their age on the app is listed as 60-something. So, you know this is a really old profile, and there's no way that this person is even checking their account anymore." P14 (M,69)

They believed that platforms benefited from maintaining a larger number of profiles, regardless of their quality, authenticity, or safety, as observed by P29 (F, 73): "I don't think these companies that run these services do enough to investigate who's joining." When participants were unaware that a profile might be inactive, being ignored often led to feelings of rejection.

> "It's a pretty horrible situation. I think they keep profiles of people who no longer want to be on the platform—people who might be dead, married, or otherwise inactive. They use these profiles dishonestly to maintain their inventory, so both non-members and paying members might end up contacting people who aren't active, and their messages just go into a black hole. This can lead to feelings of rejection, even though the person they're trying to reach isn't even there anymore." P27 (F, 69)

These experiences created tensions with the platform. They perceived that the commercial incentives for online dating sites did not necessarily align with their goal to form a romantic relationship. As P13 (M, 63) observed, "They're designed to keep you swiping rather than to help you find a date (. . .) it's not in their best interest to actually help you find someone." Beyond this perceived misalignment of incentives, the prevalence of fraudulent and ghost accounts further eroded participants' trust in the platforms.

4.3.4. Presence of AI Increases Mistrust

Participants expressed concerns with the impact of AI on online dating. They often wondered whether they were communicating with a real person, a bot, or someone using AI tools to deceive them.

> "And it's hard to get a sense of somebody's personality online. I can talk to you [in-person] and sort of feel that you're honest, but online, I mean, could it be a ChatGPT profile? Is it a real person? Is it not a real person?" P24 (F, 61)

4.4. Theme 4: Deepening the Connection: Trust in Growing Relationships

Once a match was established, participants entered into exploring a connection with a responsive individual, and not just their pre-written profile.

4.4.1. Getting Real

Typically, participants started with in-platform communication and progressed to out-of-platform communication such as email, texting, or calling, before finally embarking on an in-person meeting if sufficient trust and connection were built.

> "Well, we'd probably talk online for at least three weeks to a month. If everything seemed to be going well, then we could meet in person. P15 (F, 67)

To keep themselves safe when deciding to transition between online to offline, they often relied on how "real" their match seems to be and their own intuition about their match, as P23(M, 76) remarked "I have to say, you know, gut reaction, pure instinct. My father told me that if something's too good to be true, it usually is." P23 (M, 76). They often felt that they had to be responsible for themselves and very diligent, as there were no other support mechanisms in place.

> "You know, the only safety you have is what you create for yourself because there's nothing to check on these people." P5 (F, 67)

Exchanging messages with potential partners was also an opportunity to gauge how truthful they were. In some cases, participants reported that their matches followed a "scam script," such as telling a

sad story or love bombing to later ask for financial help.

> "Get this. I've been asked, actually, for $150,000. Can you imagine? How can you even imagine that? I mean, it took my breath away." P4 (F, 76)

Meeting in person was the ultimate test to see if the person was who they said they were:

> "The big thing is that you really need to sit down and talk to the person, maybe over coffee or something. That's where you can truly get a feel for who they are." P11 (M, 73)

For a first date, they preferred a casual coffee meeting to venues or activities associated with a more serious date. That's because the first in-person meeting was seen as another step toward evaluating the partner and building trust.

> "One of the things my friends and I talk about is that the first date isn't really a date. It's more like an extended vibe check. If you view it any other way, you're more likely to get into trouble. You know, the first date is about determining if this person is who you think they are." P18 (F,66)

4.4.2. Trust is Fragile

Consistency was perceived as key, and trust building proved to be very fragile. Multiple participants described having discovered that a match was lying about their age, or that their profile photos were outdated, and these falsehoods were generally described as an unforgivable breach of trust.

> "It's not that his age was a problem, but if he lies about things like this, it makes you wonder what else he is lying about." P3 (F,61)

In addition, they relied on their accumulated experience throughout the online dating process to find confirmation that someone was being truthful or not. Recognizing, however, that there is a learning curve through this experience and that they become more knowledgeable in identifying red flags everyday.

> "I didn't check anybody on Google at first (. . .) I get smarter every day. I wasn't that smart back then." P28 (F, 85)

4.4.3. Dating in a Community

Participants recognized a broader online dating community beyond potential matches. Although they found it difficult to interact directly with this community, they actively sought others' experiences and advice online. They also viewed unsuccessful matches as part of this community, providing opportunities to learn from past interactions and inform future dating decisions.

> "I was later advised by one of the guys [. . .] 'If I had been you, I wouldn't have shared that you had been a senior manager, because that means you've got a great pension.' And I asked, 'Was that attractive to you?' And he said, 'No, I've got a great pension too.'" P31 (F, 73)

Still, participants generally disliked the difficulty of connecting with a broader community, and mentioned that formerly, platforms such as OKCupid had had explicit forums for this kind of community-building before they were purchased by match.com

> "Since Match Group bought up all those sites, like OkCupid, it used to be not just a nice way to meet people but also had more of a sense of community. And all of that's gone now. Everything is part of swipe culture for the most part." P18 (F, 66)

4.4.4. Deleting Profiles When a Serious Relationship Emerges

When entering a serious relationship, participants expected both partners to delete their dating profiles. However, some reported difficulty deleting their own profiles or later discovered that their profiles remained active despite their attempts to remove them. Receiving messages from new matches while in a relationship was perceived as problematic, as it could create tension and affect trust between partners.

> "This is something that drove me nuts—you had trouble completely removing everything about yourself. A couple of months after my significant other and I started dating, one thing we agreed on, like many people do when they feel a relationship is serious, is to say, 'Okay, I'm no longer online. I'm taking my profile down.' I said I had done it, but somehow my significant other got a message that I hadn't. And I really had. There seemed to be a shadow of my account still there because I was even getting emails from Match afterward. So, getting off was hard." P31 (F, 73)

5. DISCUSSION

Our thematic analysis identified four main themes corresponding to key stages of the online dating process that shaped how older adults experienced and managed privacy and safety (Deciding to Date Online: Reducing Stress and Risk, Creating a Profile: Managing Self-Disclosure and Presentability, Evaluating Profiles: Becoming a Trust Detective, and Deepening a Connection: Trust in Growing Relationships).

Older adults in our study generally approached the search for romance with some degree of skepticism and were clear about the need to establish trust rather than assume it. While they appreciated the

freedom to share what they wished, they knew others could do the same. They were also aware of potential risk, in particular that their age group were often a target of romance scams. People played the role of detectives, investigating their matches and looking for consistency across a variety of presentation elements to establish trust and connection. Online dating platforms were generally appreciated as a tool that supported their privacy. Older adults felt empowered to share only what they wanted and to easily exit the activity if they didn't appreciate what someone else was sharing.

Our participants reported becoming more effective at protecting themselves through experience. They refined their strategies by reflecting on previous interactions, observing other users' behavior, and learning from friends who were dating online or in broader online communities. Many appreciated platforms that fostered community interactions rather than focusing exclusively on matching potential romantic partners, and some expressed missing earlier platforms that supported these forms of engagement, such as OkCupid.

When creating a profile, older adults generally described similar approaches across genders, sharing photos, age, activities, and interests to show they were still cognitively and/or physically active. A more notable difference emerged by sexual orientation. Although only two participants identified as homosexual, they were more hesitant to share photos because of concerns about being recognized or targeted. These concerns likely reflect the lasting effects of greater historical stigma toward the LGBT+ community.

Other privacy concerns were primarily centered on family members and friends, particularly those who were not themselves dating. These concerns appear to be influenced by persistent societal misconceptions that older adults are not interested in romantic relationships. Consequently, participants generally preferred to keep their use of online dating platforms private from those in their offline social circles.

5.1. Mistrust in Online Dating

Older adults in our study described several frustrations and concerns related to online dating platforms that affected their sense of privacy and safety. A central challenge was determining whether another person was genuine, a common issue across all online dating users. This concern was reinforced by feeling that they were targeted for romance scams, and frequent encounters with accounts that appeared to be fraudulent or "ghost accounts" (inactive accounts that appeared to be active). These experiences increased participants' mistrust not only of other users but also of the platforms themselves. Because many older adults in our study reported approaching online dating with skepticism from the start, repeated encounters with untrustworthy situations or users may further erode their confidence in the platform and discourage them from continuing to date online.

Regarding trust in other users, participants remained vigilant throughout the dating process, and trust was often fragile, with small inconsistencies seen as breaches of trust. Besides not knowing if others were who they said they were, concerns frequently centered on age, both in terms of how participants believed they were judged because of their own age and the possibility that others were misrepresenting theirs. Despite these concerns, only two participants admitted to lying about their age, both describing feelings of insecurity and fear of being dismissed solely because of it. Although most participants did not report misrepresenting their own age, many had encountered someone who had.

Participants also expressed concern that advances in artificial intelligence were making it increasingly difficult to distinguish authentic users from fraudulent ones, potentially undermining protective strategies such as "reading between the lines" and looking for consistency across profiles and conversations.

Finally, participants felt that the ability to exit online dating was just as important as entering. They found the process of deleting their profiles frustrating, with cases of believing they had deleted their profiles only to find that their profiles were still showing as active in the platform's inventory. This was especially concerning when they started a serious relationship with someone. At the same time, participants also reported encountering "ghost accounts." Encountering those accounts was both frustrating and heartbreaking, especially for those who felt rejected when they did not receive responses. In the design of online dating platforms, we suggest that platforms frequently monitor for inactive accounts to avoid leaving them active in the inventory. We also suggest making the full deletion process less opaque for older users.

5.2. Older Adults and Younger Adults: Similar Strategies, Different Contexts

Older and younger adults who date online share many similarities. Like younger adults, older adults sought to present themselves as attractive while remaining authentic. They also expressed concerns about deception and rejection, and used similar privacy and safety strategies, such as limiting personal

information, avoiding identifiable details, and gradually sharing more as trust developed (Hobbs et al. 2017; Obada-Obieh and Somayaji 2017). When evaluating potential partners, both groups described "playing the detective" by verifying identities online, looking for inconsistencies or red flags, and gradually moving conversations from the dating platform to text or video calls before meeting in person (Obada-Obieh and Somayaji 2017).

Despite these similarities, our findings also highlight important differences. Online dating has become an established part of younger adults' dating culture (McPherson et al. 2025). Even when younger adults do not actively date online or choose not to disclose their dating activities, there is generally an underlying assumption that they are dating. In contrast, many of our participants had to navigate general misconceptions that romantic relationships were no longer important at their stage of life, leading them to worry about judgment from family and friends. Yet, dating was still an important aspect of their lives. Many also turned to online dating only after widowhood or divorce to overcome barriers to meeting new partners and gradually adapt to contemporary dating norms. These differences are reflected in the platforms each group tends to use. Younger adults commonly use casual swipe-based smartphone applications such as Tinder (Vogels and McClain 2023), whereas older adults in both our study and the Pew Research survey by Faverio and Sidoti (2023) preferred profile-based platforms such as Match.com, which support richer profiles and more deliberate search for matches.

Our findings also contrast with previous research on younger women, who frequently report experiencing sexual harassment on dating platforms and express concerns about physical safety when meeting matches in person (Vogels and McClain 2023). In contrast, the older women in our study generally reported feeling safe when meeting matches face-to-face. Several attributed this to their age, believing they were less likely to be targeted for sexual harassment or physical violence.

5.3. Limitations and Future Work

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting our findings. First, participant self-selection may have introduced self-selection bias, as most were highly educated, financially secure, in good health, and comfortable with technology. Our sample may not represent a broader population of older adults who are dating online. Another important consideration when interpreting our findings is that our sample included more women than men. Although we observed relatively few gender differences in our interviews, the experiences of older men may be underrepresented. Men may also have been less willing to discuss experiences that could be interpreted as vulnerability or weakness (Ratcliffe et al. 2024). In addition, we did not find significant differences between younger-older-adults and older-older-adults, which could also be related to self-selection bias in our sample.

Future research should examine the online dating experiences of older adults from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to understand better how factors such as financial resources, education, sexual orientation, and digital literacy shape privacy and security concerns. It should also explore the perspectives of older men, LGBT+ older adults, and those who wish to date but avoid online dating platforms, to better understand differences and barriers to adoption. Finally, quantitative studies could assess the generalizability of our findings.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how older adults navigate privacy and safety while dating online. Through semi-structured interviews with 31 adults aged 60–84, we found that dating continues to play a significant role in later life. Privacy and safety management emerged as an ongoing process that evolved throughout the online dating activity. Our thematic analysis identified four main themes corresponding to key stages of dating online (Deciding to Date: Reducing Stress and Risk, Creating a Profile: Managing Self-Disclosure and Presentability, Evaluating Profiles: Becoming a Trust Detective, and Deepening a Connection: Trust in Growing Relationships).

Our findings indicate that older adults take an active role in managing the challenges of online dating. Many began their online dating experiences with skepticism, cautious about trusting others. Over time, they drew on their own experience, did personal research, and looked for consistency and authenticity before deciding to trust or share more personal information. Trust, however, was never absolute; participants were ready to pull back if they noticed warning signs or inconsistencies. They also found frustrating issues with the platforms, such as fraudulent or inactive accounts, which eroded their trust in online dating altogether. This work adds to our understanding of privacy, online dating, and ageing by highlighting how older adults' privacy and safety practices evolve as they build relationships online.

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