

Negotiating “Naturalness”: Gender, Aging, and Visual Communication in Midlife Online Dating

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Abstract

In online dating, appearance is not merely evaluated as attractive or unattractive; it is interpreted as evidence of identity, authenticity, age, and relational suitability. This qualitative study examines how single heterosexual men in midlife make sense of women's visual self-presentation, with particular attention to the ideal of looking “natural.” The analysis draws on semi-structured interviews and moderated discussion groups concerning attraction, dating profiles, cosmetic practices, and partner selection.

Participants repeatedly expressed a preference for women who appeared natural, yet their accounts showed that naturalness was not understood as the absence of aesthetic work. Rather, it referred to a carefully managed appearance in which grooming, makeup, styling, and cosmetic intervention remained discreet. Visible filters, heavily edited photographs, and conspicuous procedures were often read as signs of inauthenticity, insecurity, or incompatibility. At the same time, participants expected vitality, grooming, and some moderation of age-related changes, thereby reproducing tension between the stated acceptance of aging and the continued privileging of youthful appearance. Their narratives also revealed inconsistencies between general preferences and descriptions of actual partners.

The findings conceptualize “naturalness” as a socially negotiated and gendered form of visual communication. They demonstrate how online dating platforms transform aesthetic choices into relational signals and how midlife attraction is shaped by the intersection of gender norms, aging, digital self-presentation, and expectations of authenticity. The study contributes to interdisciplinary research on intimacy, identity, and mediated social interaction.