

“That always surprises me, the dark in the light”: meaningful pleasure in creative leisure of midlife women

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Abstract

Hegemonic narratives of midlife portray this understudied life-stage as a time of decline, depression, and joyless juggling of career and caregiving. Women in midlife face the “double standard” of aging at the intersection of ageism and sexism (Sontag 1972), pressured to “age successfully” (Lamb et al. 2017). An interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al. 2009) comprising interviews, observations, and photo-elicitation of five women in the Netherlands suggests a counternarrative, by which engagement in creative leisure provides opportunities for pleasure, delight, sensual joy, and flourishing through midlife transitions. The findings reveal a wide array of meaningful pleasures in creative leisure: embodied delights, immersive sensations, transformative play, adventurous risk taking, friendships, new learning, and identity exploration. These pleasures gain nuanced understanding when considered in context of fears of aging and mortality, embodied inhibitions, and self-criticism. The sombre themes

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enhance the joyful ones, highlighting dark and light as a delicate interplay underpinning women's creative leisure in midlife.

Keywords: arts and crafts, leisure, meaningful aging, midlife, pleasure

Introduction

Midlife is a life-phase largely overlooked in academic scholarship. Lachman (2015) believes that misconceptions and stereotypes about this period abound, with the commonly held idea of a "midlife crisis" offset with growing evidence that midlife is also a time of peak activity, self-esteem, and self-confidence. Positioning midlife as a pivotal period of life, Lachman brings attention to its crucial importance, while also pointing to it being a time of balancing, an intersection between losses and gains. Lulle (2024) calls for more narrative-based study on midlife, seeing it as a transitional life-phase that, unlike those of youth and later life, bears most of societal load for both caregiving and work, and yet remains largely unexplored and opaque. Harmon and Lee (2024) agree that midlife can be a time of crisis but argue that it also holds potential for an awakening of meaning, specifically through engagement in leisure. The link between meaningful leisure and happiness, fulfilment, and wellbeing in midlife has not yet been studied sufficiently, with existing research focusing mostly on work-leisure dichotomies.

The experience of midlife is gendered, and it is useful to examine it considering both ageism and sexism (Gullette 1988; Sontag 1972). For many women, midlife is a particularly complex and transitional time of life with clashing needs and demands, as society expects them to be productive members of the workforce while also caring for multiple generations of family members (Gullette 1988; Pickard 2016). These gendered experiences of midlife extend also to leisure. Women often feel like they need to justify their choice of how to spend their time, internalize guilt when prioritizing leisure over caregiving, and judge themselves against a (super)womanhood image. This can lead to self-criticism, depression, and a lack of balance (Fullagar 2008). Ridgeway (2024) finds that research into leisure of women in midlife tends to be limited to discussing barriers and calls to also examine its meanings.

The meaningfulness of leisure in the lives of women in midlife is thus worthy of deeper examination. Our article aims to add to this emerging area of study, by examining how five women in midlife experience meaningful leisure occupations of arts and crafts. Specifically, we will examine what forms of pleasure occur during their leisure occupations, as well as how such pleasures give rise to meaningfulness, especially when considered in context of the gendered aging experiences that are unique to women in midlife.

Literature Overview

Midlife Expectations: Productivity and “Successful Aging”

The life stage of midlife has long been viewed as one of peak productivity; rife in responsibilities yet not necessarily pleasures. Pickard (2016) describes the metaphor of “life course as a staircase” (p. 69), by which life stages from childhood through adulthood are seen as an upward progress toward peak performance through the capitalist lenses of work, productivity, and success, until reaching its summit at the age of pension, and then falling down the inevitable decline of older age. With work as its main context, midlife presents as a time of prime productive adulthood. A more recent neoliberal late-capitalist perspective of relevance is “successful aging,” rooted in the belief that maintaining good health as one ages is an individual moral issue of personal responsibility, a demonstration of self-governance and self-control benefiting the consumerist society by minimizing the burden on public resources (Lamb et al. 2017). As part of this “new medical order,” under which the aging body must adapt and combat its physical decay (Zwijnenberg 2024), there is an increasing attention to the need to “successfully work through” health challenges related to midlife, such as menopause (e.g. McCartan 2025). Taken together, midlife appears to be a time ridden with stress, anxiety, and potential for burnout (Pickard 2016), and subject to societal expectations of productivity and denial of vulnerability (Lamb et al. 2017). There appears to be little room in midlife for non-productive explorations of meaning, playfulness, or for that matter, pleasure.

Adopting a perspective that meaningful aging is a nuanced alternative to both the capitalist emphasis on productivity and the neoliberal

“successful aging” paradigm, this article is grounded in a critical view that counters sexist expectations of women in midlife to be (super)women (Fullagar 2008) and to conform to other aspects of midlife chrononormativity, a term that comes from queer studies (Freeman 2010) and since extended by age studies (e.g. Wanka 2025). By giving attention to what lies beyond demands for productivity, caretaking, a denial of natural aging processes, and an over-reliance on the biomedicalization of aging, we aim to embrace a more inspired and multilayered vision of midlife. We find resonance in Pickard’s (2016) description of midlife as encompassing both “the energy of youth not yet entirely abated and the wisdom of old age also in sight” (p. 85), and more importantly a time that offers women with new opportunities for playfulness and meaningfulness (Fullager 2008; Stalp et al. 2008). It is in this nuanced scene of midlife that we emplace our inquiry.

Leisure as a Counter Narrative of Midlife Women’s Experiences

Harmon and Lee (2024) believe that leisure presents an opportunity for people in midlife to break free from society’s clock and embrace their own psychological one, “to chart their own trajectory through life and leisure, even if not in accordance with societal expectations” (p. 2). However, as Gullette (1988) observed, midlife presents specific challenges to women, primarily that they are often caregivers to others, both younger and older, and find it difficult to prioritize their own care (Fullagar 2008). Gullette’s feminist and agentic view of midlife point to opportunities that exist for women to increase well-being by engaging in leisure. Pai and Pai (2014) link leisure participation for midlife women to increased agency and female empowerment, defining leisure as “activities that are undertaken because they afford pleasure or happiness in themselves [...] that is, not for their instrumental value” (p. 163). And yet, feeling entitled to pleasure and happiness may be challenging for some women, given the sociality and conditionality of traditional “happiness scripts,” by which a woman’s duty, and the source of her own happiness, depends on ensuring that of others; primarily her husband, elders, and children (Ahmed 2010). Brown (2019) believes that “we all need and deserve pleasure” (p. 7), and that feeling free to pursue it is the key to our aliveness and wholeness, however the right to pleasure has been unjustly afforded primarily to white males.

Relatedly, women are impacted by the intersection of ageism and sexism that creates a “double standard” of aging, penalizing women for aging in ways that men are not. Judged primarily for how youthful, unblemished, and “feminine” their appearance is, rather than how wise, competent or strong they are, women experience aging with shame and a feeling of invisibility (Sontag 1972; Woodward 2006). Kim et al. (2022) report that women’s leisure in midlife mediates the negative psychosocial impact of biological and social changes by providing increased self-efficacy, competence, and confidence. Fullagar (2008) believes that participation in leisure in midlife “[offers] women time and space to transform their everyday practices of care for others into practices of care for oneself” (p. 42). To make that shift, however, they first need to overcome “issues of guilt, fear of pleasure, and thus a problematic sense of entitlement relating to the right to enjoy one’s life” (p. 48). Ridgeway (2024) believes that leisure, tied to a spectrum of emotions including joy and pleasure, offers transformative potential for women in midlife.

Creative Leisure Occupations and Embodied Pleasure

When it comes to the nature of pleasure, Bramble (2015) differentiates between sensory and attitudinal theories. Sensory, or “felt-based” theories of pleasure focus on the phenomenology of the experience, whereas attitudinal theories assume that it is necessary to first possess an attitude of “liking” an experience for it to actually be pleasurable. A “felt-based,” embodied and sensorial view of pleasure – by which an experience is desired and pursued because it is felt and sensed as pleasurable, and not the other way around – aligns well with an occupational perspective, by which “all human action, including occupation, occurs through a corporeal body” (Bailliard et al. 2018: 224). Creative leisure occupations such as arts and crafts are experienced through the body, their meaning involving human-material entanglements, body-based knowing, and embodied cognitions (Niedderer & Townsend 2025). The act of using one’s hands and body to create artefacts results in the “sheer enjoyment of making something exist that didn’t exist before, of using one’s own agency, dexterity, feelings and judgment to mould, form, touch, hold and craft physical materials, apart from anticipating the fact of its eventual beauty, uniqueness or usefulness” (Dissanayake 1995: 2). Pleasure during arts and

crafts may also stem from using tools. Dissanayake (1995) points out that the evolution of hand use is at the root of all human achievement, as the early *homo faber* – the toolmaking animal – used tools to make their marks on the world and leave evidence of their thoughts and actions. The emergence of hand skills is an observable source of delight in babies, as they discover the possibilities of their first attempts at grasping and releasing. Not limited to infancy, however, the lifelong relationship between human bodies, pleasurable emotions, and the ability to shape one's own environment through making is not coincidental, as "pleasure in handling is hardwired into human nature for good reason: it predisposes us to be tool users and makers" (Dissanayake 1995: 5).¹ Creative leisure occupations provide many such opportunities for sensorial, "felt-based," and embodied pleasure.

Playful Engagement with Creative Leisure in Midlife

Intertwined with leisure and pleasure is play (Yarnal et al. 2008). Performed for its intrinsic meaning and motivated by pleasure rather than necessity, play is lifelong and not just limited to childhood (Swinnen & de Medeiros 2018). Blanche et al. (2024) state that the occupation of adult play (which they categorize by creativity – adventure, restoration, deep engagement, ludos, and mastery play) contributes to wellness and brings meaning and purpose to daily life. Swinnen and de Medeiros (2018) find that in later life, play has "potential for expression, meaning-making, and relationship-building" (p. 261), recognizing that it taps into the very essence of humanity, spanning not just humor and fun but also grief and loss.

Costello (2007) examines pleasure that arises in context of playful engagement with art and proposes a framework of 13 categories of pleasure, painted with similar shades of emotions, encompassing both light and dark. Creative leisure occupations are often playful, and many of these categories are correspondently applicable: creation, exploration, discovery, difficulty, competition, danger, captivation, sensation, sympathy, simulation, fantasy, camaraderie, and subversion.

¹There is increasing evidence that non-human animals are also tool users and makers (e.g. Shumaker et al. 2024).

Stalp et al. (2008) believe that midlife is often the first time that women feel free to explore leisure interests of their choice, as children age out of the home and retirement approaches. At the same time, however, with the transition from the reproductive to the post-reproductive years, women start becoming socially “invisible” (Woodward 2006). By engaging in personally meaningful leisure, women in midlife can “indulge in fun, care-free activity *not* focused on their family or community [...] challenging gendered notions of appropriate behavior for midlife and older women” (Stalp et al. 2008: 329). Experiencing fun, play, pleasure, and joy through leisure can be transformative to women in midlife going through transitions such as divorce (Ridgway 2024). Thus, creative leisure occupations have the potential to bring an array of emotions and experiences to women in midlife, and to provide playful moments in which they can break from sexist and chrononormative expectations, providing care for themselves.

Method

Phenomenological Study of Experiences of Meaningfulness

This article focuses on one part of the first author’s multimethod dissertation project, which combines phenomenological and sensorial approaches to study experiences of meaningfulness during creative leisure in midlife. This article centers on the method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Phenomenological research aims to describe and understand individual experiences of a phenomenon, focusing on personal meanings in a specific context and aiming to find common themes that can be transferred to other contexts, where insights from one context can be meaningfully applied to another (van Wijngaarden et al. 2017). IPA comprises three concepts: “phenomenology” – the study of lived experience, “hermeneutics” – the interpretation, and “idiography” – the particular (Smith et al. 2009). We position this article’s inquiry within IPA’s interpretive stance, by which the experience of creative leisure is subjective; its reality and meaning

emerging from that individual's situated relatedness to the social, historical, and physical worlds that they inhabit (Eatough & Smith 2017). Our task is to enter these lifeworlds and gain access to the participants' interpretations of their experiential descriptions of engaging in arts and crafts, and through a double-hermeneutic process, interpret those interpretations ourselves. Bracketing our inevitable pre-suppositions and balancing a phenomenological stance of both empathy and suspicion (Eatough & Smith 2017), we will contextualize our interpretations of these subjective experiences with theory, to attempt broader claims about meaningful experiences of creative leisure for women in midlife, while retaining the integrity of the idiographic perspective in our analysis.

As mentioned earlier, the IPA reported here is part of the project of the first author, who will write in first person from here on. I designed the project, recruited the participants, and collected and analyzed all the data, with my co-authors reviewing and providing input to all stages of the study, informed by their respective disciplines (care ethics and qualitative research, and aging studies). Invariably, all aspects of this study were influenced by my experiences and pre-suppositions, as a middle-aged female occupational therapist with a background in design, a hearing impairment, and experiences of migration.

Ethics

The study received approval from the Ethical Review Committee Inner City faculties (ERCIC) of Maastricht University, The Netherlands, and informed consent was obtained from all individual participants. Participants consented to the use of photography, as both a research method and mode of output. All names of people and places have been changed.

Participants

IPA prescribes a small sample size, prioritizing depth (Smith et al. 2009; Tavakol & Sandars 2025). The five participants selected to participate in this study are a purposeful sample, meeting the inclusion criteria of being between 40 and 65 years old, residing in the Netherlands, fluent in English, and having a meaningful tangible creative leisure occupation. All the participants were recruited from my own social network, which

helped me ease into the role of interviewer, setting a relaxed tone that carried on to subsequent data collection moments, as well. Nevertheless, I made a conscious effort to bracket this familiarity as best as possible, entering all the participants' lifeworlds with a similar attitude of wonder and curiosity, conducting the interviews in a manner that did not assume prior knowledge but rather "consciously naïve and open; [...] receptive to change and ambiguity" (Eatough & Smith 2017: 206). Next, I will briefly introduce the five women and their creative leisure.

Ellen is 55 years old, married, and the mother of two teenagers. The family relocated to the Netherlands 7 years ago, leaving their extended family behind. Ellen has a postgraduate degree and works full-time in higher education. Her husband recently retired, and they are preparing for their children to soon leave the nest. Ellen began knitting a year and a half ago, inspired by her visiting sister-in-law, and has since been learning from yarn stores and YouTube videos. She knits several evenings a week after dinner, on the sofa, and particularly enjoys making things for herself to wear.

Nicky is 47 years old, married, and the mother of two school-age children. She has a university education. The family relocated to the Netherlands 8 years ago, leaving behind aging parents, as well as Nicky's stressful career. She has decided not to go back to work and instead dedicates herself to pursuing various leisure and artistic interests, which include drawing, painting, sculpture, and upholstery. Nicky has taken various art classes and upholstery workshops in recent years and now has a small atelier in the backyard, where most days she can be found working on upholstery projects.

Stacey is 49 years old, married, and the mother of two teenagers. She moved to the Netherlands as a young woman and is married to a Dutch man. She is involved in the care of his elderly parents, while her own mother is far away. Stacey has a secondary vocational education and works full-time in the public sector. She has been doing paper crafts for the past 15 years. Stacey's craft practice ebbs and flows; there are periods when she makes things weekly, sitting at the kitchen table, and other times when she reads and writes on a more irregular basis, instead.

Tess is 54 years old, married, and the mother of two school-age children. She and her husband are Dutch. Tess has a university education and works full-time as an educator as well as an entrepreneur. She is involved

in caring for her mother and her husband's family. Tess has been interested in making jewelry since her youth but only began taking classes 8 years ago. Her "craft time" is every Tuesday evening at a local community jewelry workshop, a weekly ritual which she never misses.

Anita is 64 years old. She is married, has two children, and one grandchild. She is Dutch and has a vocational education. Anita works part-time in a retail job she has held since her children were young, but is preparing to retire soon, as soon as her husband does so himself. The couple moved in with Anita's mother 9 years ago, to take care of her. She passed away recently after a long illness. Anita started taking weekly art classes 5 years ago. When her mother's condition worsened, she stopped drawing for about a year and is now slowly returning to it. She draws at the dining table but hopes to one day set up a home studio.

Data Collection

The participants were told that the aim of the project was to study meaningful experiences that occur during creative hobbies, in midlife. I explained that I was interested in what they articulated verbally, as well as in non-verbal expressions of embodied and emplaced aspects of meaningfulness in their creative leisure. To capture both strands of my research question, I would be interviewing them, as well as noting sensory information and taking photographs of their art or craft "in action," on which they would later be asked to reflect on, in writing. Although the methods are intertwined, this article will focus solely on the IPA method, which was based on three types of textual data per participant: interview transcripts, observation session transcripts, and photo elicitation responses.

Interviews

With each participant, I conducted a semi-structured interview that followed a prepared interview schedule (Smith et al. 2009) with eight broad topics that aimed to access the meaningfulness of engaging with a tangible creative leisure occupation in context of midlife: the art/craft; materials; tools; spaces; end products; midlife roles & occupations; life transitions; future goals. Recognizing that all aspects of qualitative research, including the choice of interview topics, are influenced by the researcher's

positionality (Holmes 2020), the focus on material interactions was likely informed by my own creative making experiences, while the larger occupational lens was invariably shaped by my clinical background. Mindful of bracketing my own pre-suppositions, I conducted the interviews as open-ended, expansive questions with follow-up prompts (Smith et al. 2009), allowing the flow to move away from a rigid schedule, enabling the generation of unexpected topics brought up by the participants (Smith & Osborn 2008), such as experiences at the spa, and surviving cancer. The interviews were held in person at each participant's home, lasting between 60 and 95 minutes. I recorded the interviews on tape, which I later listened to carefully, transcribing the text verbatim myself. This formed the first IPA transcript per participant. The participants were offered the opportunity to read over the transcripts of their interviews, to check for accuracy. Ellen, Stacey, and Tess did so, while Nicky and Anita chose to waive this invitation.

Observation Sessions

Following the interviews, I conducted observation sessions of the creative occupations in action, held in the environments in which that art or craft usually takes place. These observation sessions, lasting between 60 and 130 minutes, were recorded on tape. I transcribed these tapes verbatim, resulting in the second IPA transcript for each participant.

During the observations, I engaged in conversation, interacted with tools and materials, photographed the activity, and noted sensory information. My active and emplaced role was deliberate; I considered these sessions as a participatory co-production of embodied meaning-making (Drysdale & Wong 2019). Aiming to capture non-verbal aspects of meaningfulness during emplaced and embodied moments of daily living, the sensory notes included both the participants' (observed) and my own (sensed) multisensorial experiences (Pink 2015). Immersing myself in the interaction while also maintaining a phenomenological anthropologist's distanced reflection (Throop 2018), I attended to the participant's and my own experiences of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, as well as balance, proprioception, vibration, pressure, movement patterns, routines, and embodied cognitions. The sensory notes were recorded on a fieldwork sheet (Drysdale & Wong 2019) and later fleshed out into short

vignettes (Valtonen et al. 2010). The audio recordings documented the soundscapes of tools and materials in action, while the photos captured visual aspects of the events (Pink 2015). This cumulative data, and its interpretation, formed the basis to a sensory ethnography study, reported separately in Amiri-Savitzky et al. (2023).

Photo Elicitation Responses

The photographs taken during the observation sessions provided a starting point for a method in which I asked the participants to respond to the action photographs that I had made. I would later go on to conduct my own visual analysis of the photos. This adaptation of photo-elicitation is reported on in Amiri-Savitzky et al. (2024). For the focused purpose of the IPA method discussed here, only the participants' responses to the photos were considered the third IPA transcript.

To summarize, the data collection events described above resulted in an IPA dataset per participant comprising three transcripts, apart from Anita. In her case, the interview, observation session, photography, and response to the photo elicitation were all conducted in one sitting, resulting in one combined transcript. A total of 13 transcripts were thus produced, forming the basis for this IPA study.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed the six steps prescribed by IPA (Smith et al. 2009), followed by a narrative summary. Starting with the first case, Ellen's, I copied the interview transcript to a Word document and read it closely several times, immersing myself in it. I then made initial notes on three different levels (descriptive, linguistic and conceptual), using different colors, in the margins of the document. For verification of this step, my co-authors each performed several "mini-audits" (Smith et al. 2009).

Next, transitioning the transcripts to a shared project file in the Atlas.ti (version 25) platform, I closely re-read each text again to develop the initial notes into emergent themes, aiming for a higher level of abstraction while still maintaining a connection to the "core essence" of the individual participant's lived experience (Alase 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014). This resulted in the development of many emergent themes. While

still maintaining an inductive stance, I facilitated the coding by organizing the emergent themes, as they arose, in a codebook in Excel, placing them into “holding” categories informed by my experiences as an occupational therapist accustomed to observing occupation within its context: self, occupation, social environment, and physical environment. Within those categories, the emergent themes soon began to gather around 10 smaller clusters: embodied cognitions, learning & growing, roles & identity, self-esteem, emotional transformation, outlook & views, other people, time & space, tools, materials & objects. By having the codebook as an aid to cluster emergent themes while continuing to inductively code the transcripts, I was able to efficiently see if a suitable theme had already been created, avoid the creation of near-duplicates, and encourage subtle differences to stand out among similarities. To increase trustworthiness, my co-authors and I frequently discussed and refined the emergent clusters and themes (Alase 2017). Once I had completed the coding for the entire dataset of the first participant, I searched for convergences and divergences (combining and splitting themes), until I arrived at a table of emergent superordinate and subordinate themes.

I repeated this process for each participant, bracketing off to the best of my ability the ideas of previous cases, adding each new set of transcripts into a shared Atlas.ti project file and coding them with a fresh group of inductive codes, until arriving at five tables of emergent superordinate and subordinate themes. These were arranged as five separate sheets in one Excel file. I then considered all the themes that had emerged in the five cases in several combined sheets, noting patterns, convergences, and divergences both within and across clusters as they crossed the cases, again combining and splitting themes, until arriving at the project’s overarching superordinate and subordinate themes. Once again, my co-authors and I discussed these findings, until reaching consensus.

Finally, I took a step back from the close work of codes, tables, and sheets, to reflect on my overreaching interpretation of how each participant experienced the meaningfulness of their creative leisure, which I summarized in narrative form. I considered not only the transcripts and emergent themes but also my own embodied and emplaced experiences of interacting with them, their arts and crafts, and their creative spaces. This step brought the double-hermeneutic to the fore, as I was now interpreting the entirety of my participants’ own interpretations of their

experience. By maintaining a connection in Atlas.ti and the codebook between the original transcripts and the emergent themes of each participant, as they evolved to the final analysis, and seeking to capture the “core essence” of the lived experience of the creative leisure for each individual (Alase 2017), I was able to go back to the transcripts and identify the one quotation per participant that best exemplified each final subordinate theme (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014).

Reflexivity

Engward and Goldspink (2020) add to Smith et al. (2009)’s foundational six-step IPA process an extra sub-step, “Attending to reflexive echoes” (p. 44). This proved helpful in enabling me to “live with” the data, recognize both the participants’ and my own presence in the research, and ensure that each participant’s story stayed true to their lifeworlds (Engward & Goldspink 2020). Embracing a reflexive approach as per Holmes (2020), I conducted frequent co-author checks as well as maintained a reflexive diary, with entries such as: “At [Nicky’s] questioning, I share some of my own experiences with having a sick older parent far away. I wonder if I’m sharing too much, but we do have this common experience.” In another entry, I reflect on technique: “During the interview, I found myself leading too much. I asked a few closed questions, and interrupted Ellen’s train of thought.”

Making such reflections and struggles explicit enabled me to iteratively improve my method, as well as bracket my own pre-suppositions, while still acknowledging the dual role of myself as a researcher who can only access her participants’ lifeworld through their eyes, yet also sees it through her own (Smith et al. 2009), in the double-hermeneutic “dance” and shared space of inquiry that is at the heart of IPA (Engward & Goldspink 2020).

Positionality influences all phases of research (Holmes 2020). As mentioned earlier, my background as an occupational therapist undoubtedly influenced my choice to include topics relating to roles, occupations, sensory experiences, and adapting activities in the interview schedule, and invariably impacted the way I observed and evaluated the creative occupations in action. My lifeworld also shaped my analysis of the findings. The topic raised by Nicky of missing loved ones, for example, touched on

my own experiences of aging, grief, and migration, and continued to resonate long after the interview was over. However, it was only in the final analysis of looking across cases that my sensitivity to this topic helped me identify other expressions of relational loss in all the stories, resulting in the creation of a common subtheme that might not have become evident or meaningful to another researcher. Regularly discussing my positionality and how it impacted the analysis with my co-authors, along with rigorously keeping a codebook that connected the original transcripts with findings and analysis, helped increase reflexivity, confirmability, and thus validity.

Findings

The analysis of the IPA identified multiple aspects of meaningfulness that stem from creative leisure for the five women in midlife participating in this study. Moving from the idiographic to the shared, three dyads of superordinate themes emerged, opposite aspects of meanings organized around a center point. The tension created by the duality of each of these light and dark pairings echoes the nuanced, multilayered, and often conflicted experiences of women in midlife. We begin by discussing the experience of living in a creative sensorial body that tangibly engages with materials, yet also struggles with abstracts of inhibition and mortality. We then explore the impact of social connectedness in midlife, apparent also in its absence and inevitable losses. Finally, we examine the claiming of the boundaries of one's identity, and the possibility of letting go of what hinders it. Table 1 shows the superordinate themes, with their subordinate themes.

Living in My Body: Embodied Pleasures & Corporeal Struggles

The superordinate theme "Living in my body" concerns the duality of embodied pleasures and corporeal struggles that manifest during the creative leisure occupations. The first two subordinate themes relate to sensorial joys that are immediately clear and vivid, while the third and fourth subordinate themes explore the more subtle and insidious aspects of embodying a female body in midlife.

Table 1. Superordinate and subordinate themes in the study

LIVING IN MY BODY: Embodied pleasures & Corporeal struggles	• Enjoying transformative moments of immersion and captivation • Exploring materialities of sensual pleasure and embodied knowledge • Wrestling with shame and inhibition of a female body in action • Living in an ageing body and accepting mortality
FEELING CONNECTED: Joyful friendships & Relational longings	• Finding camaraderie and intimacy • Belonging to a community of knowledge and learning • Grasping at memories and honouring absences
BECOMING MYSELF: Discovering identities & Letting go	• Creating an identity of artist or craftsperson • Claiming time and space, subverting midlife expectations • Relinquishing control to the materials, tools, and process • Battling perfectionism and fear of failure

The first subordinate theme, “Enjoying transformative moments of immersion and captivation” relates experiences of enjoyable relaxation, calm, and happiness, through immersive aspects of creative leisure. Nicky finds pleasure in the messiness of her materials at the kitchen table, leading to a hyper-focused, transformative state: “My family accepts that I’ll just be kind of head in the clouds for a while and they, they’ll still see me and I see them, but I just keep focused on what I’m doing.” Stacey shares this sense of pleasantly engrossing oneself in a craft, stating, “I can lose myself in time and space. It can go very quickly or stand still for hours.” Ellen articulates how such immersion is sensed: “It’s calming and pleasing, and it makes me feel content. It’s definitely a... you know, it sort of feels like you can slow your body down. And, yeah, it’s a relaxing kind of thing.” Tess talks of positive mood transformation arrived at through recurring motions, her repeated words mirroring the soothing activity in linguistic agreement: “I was stringing and stringing and it’s somehow, it’s a very repetitive, but it’s very, it’s very satisfying. And the longer my string became, the happier I was.”

Anita's words summarize the embodied pleasure of being immersed: "It's very focused. Which is nice. Yeah. It's a focus thing. Absolutely. Yeah. It's nice."

The second subordinate theme, "Exploring materialities of sensual pleasure and embodied knowledge" concerns human-non-human entanglements in creative leisure, where pleasure is found in how skilled bodies interact with the materialities of arts and crafts. Ellen finds herself drawn to linen: "It's because I like it, because I really like the feeling of it [...] the weight of it, and the softness of it." Tess finds sensual pleasure in interacting with silver: "If you polish it, you just see it starts to start to shine. And with each step you take, the shine becomes more intense. And that's really satisfying." The experience of a body knowing what to do and moving with deliberation appeals to Nicky:

I was enjoying it so much. It's, it's also physical, it's quite like sculpture in that way where you really have [*laugh*] wrestle with the chair to get it – to break it down to its most basic bit. And then to build it back up.

Anita finds that a drawing technique, shading, is particularly enjoyable because it uses embodied skill:

I do really like all the shading. I'm amazed at how much composition you get out of shading. That always surprises me. The dark in the light [...] you have to look, look, use your eyes and see the dark and see the light and the different shades of it.

The happy sensation of something feeling "just right" is echoed by Stacey describing skilful movements and embodied knowledge: "If I see my fingers, I am concentrated, focused, this goes back years. I know this, I've done this, I've got this. This feels good, it feels right." Indeed, her phrasing emphasizes her confidence, multiple times over.

The third subordinate theme, "Wrestling with shame and inhibition of a female body in action" turns to body-related struggles the women experience during their art or craft, such as feeling embarrassed at how they look, or insecure at being observed. Tess responds to a photo of herself crouching before the silver soldering station:

Not my most elegant pose... One last check before I can start soldering. I check to see whether or not the parts are touching; whether they are flush, whether they are straight. When everything is properly aligned, I sometimes catch myself humming.

This description is brimming with embodied flow, the happy feeling of being immersed in the moment, her body literally humming in synchronicity with the action. Yet, amid this joyous moment, there is a negative shadow cast by her perception of her body as "inelegant." Being observed while drawing was hard for Anita as well, who says, "Well, I don't feel confident sitting doing this. Yeah. [laughs]." Nicky tells a story of feeling embarrassed seeing naked models in a figure drawing class. Her monologue then shifts to recent experiences of undressing in a spa, a new experience. Despite still having inhibitions, the novel joy of being comfortable in her own body captivates her:

I hate getting undressed [laughs] that so much and once there I try not to, I'm trying not to look [at] anybody directly, or whatever. But the joy of being somewhere where you can be completely relaxed and it's so, uhm, the sensory, uhm, or the feel-good aspect of it, where you feel relaxed and clean and saunas, and I don't know... that overrides my sense of, "oh god, this is dreadful, having get undressed" [laughs].

Ellen laughs off a self-critical comment on her appearance in a close-up photo. She says, "I should put some lotion on my fingernails [laughs]." Stacey also notices her hands' dirty appearance after a crafting session, debating the impact it will have on her work persona: "I have to take a bath tonight before tomorrow because my hands will be nice and artistic [laughs]. Oh, I can [go to work like this], nobody would even pay too much attention." The debate is over; she is at peace "wearing" her creative leisure occupation.

The fourth subordinate theme, "Living in an aging body and accepting mortality," touches on vulnerability and physical decline. The photo elicitation method proved confronting to the women. Anita found it unsettling to see herself drawing, "Very old hands, don't you think? Ew [...] I think they look a little bit old, but I don't think. I always think, when I look at myself, "Jesus Christ, you look old" [laughs]. So ahh [laughs], getting older." Ellen, too, was surprised: "Somehow, I look a lot like my mother [laughs]." Embodied vulnerability and mortality looms behind Stacey's story of how a cancer diagnosis intersected with her craft:

When I first got sick, I couldn't [pause] I couldn't think, my brain was messy [laughs]. And then there's way too much emotion in there to know what to do with [...] So, I had to have a way of taking things out of getting things out of my mind, out of my body. And so, I picked up the hobby and a lot of times I was just sitting at the kitchen table pushing paper around in a circle. And I didn't know what to do with the paper or anything else, but at least I was doing something. And uhm it was something coming out and eventually things started, and I could make gifts, and I could be creative, and it helped.

Through their creative leisure, the women engage with the aging and vulnerability of not only their own bodies, but also that of the tools and materials that have become their extensions. Tess relies on slip-on leather guards to protect her fingers from the heat of working with silver:

These are my "fingers" as I call them [...] They are getting thin, though, and the protection they offer is waning. When I wear my fingers, it feels protected. I am able to work machines much more precisely without getting hurt.

In Nicky's craft, there is similar blurring of where she ends and her materials begin, all aging, vulnerable, and in need of care. "It's physically quite strenuous work and I try to be mindful of lifting chairs correctly so as not to injure myself or indeed the chair frame (if it is old and quite fragile)." Creative leisure in midlife means taking precautions and embracing vulnerability.

Feeling Connected: Joyful Friendships & Relational Longings

The superordinate theme "Feeling connected" relates to the deep joy that comes from having meaningful relationships, a sense of belonging, and being able to keep relational memories and traditions alive, despite loss and across time. The first two subordinate themes pertain to the desire for connectivity and sharing of knowledge around the creative leisure, while the third subordinate theme touches on the bittersweet reminders of loss and absence, an unavoidable part of the human condition.

The first subordinate theme, "Finding camaraderie and intimacy" concerns the joys of friendship and closeness with others. When Stacey first began her craft, she befriended like-minded people: "Slowly, I met other friends who were interested in the hobby [...] She has an atelier in her back garden and I quite often go there and hang out with her. We scrapbook together or do artwork." Nicky is quite selective about who she shares her creative leisure with:

I'm able to say hello to people that I stand next to sometimes, you know, but I don't – art is kind of a private thing [...] With the exception of Helen and maybe Lea, who I did the chairs with, uhm, I kind of think it's a private thing.

Meanwhile, Anita longs to have a nearby friend to make art with:

Well, might be nice. Might be nice, eh? I can imagine it's nice if you can share it. Share it with someone. I mean, I show people, my friends, you know, I make photos of it and it's nice to hear their encouragement, but I've never actually, uhm, sat here around the table – oh, uhm, no, only once with the girlfriend, the partner with my brother. She's quite artistic. And we sat around the table once painting stuff, that was nice. But then, she, she's, they live in Canada.

Family connections are another aspect of intimacy enabled by the art or craft, as shown through Ellen's knitting: "Well, it certainly brings me closer to my sister-in-law, so it strengthens that family tie. And, and Joe's sister also knits, so it can bring me closer to that sister-in-law as well." Reversely, craft friends can feel like kinfolk, as Tess discovers. "One of my fellow jewelry makers saw [these protective glasses] and bought them for the entire group. Wearing them makes it seem like we are family."

The second subordinate theme, "Belonging to a community of knowledge and learning" talks about how enjoyable it is to feel part of a group that shares similar interests and supports growth and mastery of new skills. Ellen says, "It's like belonging to a club and becoming, you know, becoming a knitter. I've been to several knitting stores and there's such a nice welcoming community there." Such supportive interactions can be virtual, too, as Nicky reports:

I've never attempted something like this before. So, I went online, and I found this lovely lady in England who was an upholsteress who, for 20 pounds, she sent me some info sheets, and I got access to her YouTube videos which are private. And so that was great. I essentially had a virtual teacher.

Stacey also seeks instruction as she goes:

So, any, anywhere that I come across someone I think, "oh, that's super cool," then yeah, I, I would go and do a workshop with them, or I'd have them teach me how to do it or, I'd look it up on the internet or yeah, I'll always want to acquire new skills.

The teacher-student relationship goes both ways, providing Tess with enjoyable interactions in the workshop: "So, what happens is, when one of these new members are struggling, [...] I step in, and I explain how to do it or which materials or which tools to use. And I'll ask others for information as well." Others' skills can be inspiring but also demoralizing, as Anita shares, "And everybody was on a different level. And some were painting the most beautiful things. And others were like me, were just sort of sitting there thinking, oh my god, what am I supposed to do now."

The third subordinate theme, "Grasping at memories and honoring absences," alludes to how the creative leisure provides a bittersweet space to pay homage or feel close to people who are missed, due to distance or loss. Stacy collects discarded objects that belonged to loved ones, to be used in her craft:

My aunt passed away a few years ago, [*laughs*] and I was back home visiting and one of my other aunts, who is still alive, she let me go through some of her things. And what did I take? I took, uhm, old paper [...] and a jar or tin full of buttons.

Nicky cherishes her family history through craft:

I think actually a lot of what I'm doing now, I'm proud of it because my dad was very handy. And he, he made so many things. And my aunt, his sister, also did upholstery [...] it's kind of cool that that is in the family.

Ellen has a happy memory of quality craft time with her sister-in-law, who lives far: "We went to a couple of knitting stores, and I swear the best part of my trip, the best part of my visit with her, was sitting in a knitting store, knitting together." Tess keeps family ties alive through her creations:

I don't make two identical things. I've only done it once, which was for my sisters-in-law and for my mother-in-law, I made a pendant. And that was with a crystal and some, some silver bits. And those three were identical. And well, since my mother-in-law passed, I got the, uhm, the pendant back. And so now we all three have one.

Anita's art is likewise a tangible to process the memory of her sister; "I'm trying to do my sister, my oldest sister, our oldest sister [*had*] Down syndrome, and a very expressive little face. And I tried to draw her."

Becoming Myself: Discovering Identities & Letting Go

The superordinate theme “Becoming myself” reflects pleasurable experiences of exploration, risk taking and letting go of control, leading to the development of new identities, subversion of societal expectations, and quieting of one’s own self critic. The first two subordinate themes explore the becoming of one’s self, while the third and fourth subordinate themes examine the quest to accept what is no longer helpful.

The first subordinate theme, “Creating an identity of artist or crafts-person,” centers on expressions of happiness and increased self-esteem thanks to a new creative self. Nicky’s emerging identity as a craftswoman is bolstered by external validation, “I think that the sheer fact that people [are] seeking me out based on what I’ve done for other chairs, that’s also gives me confidence that I’m heading in the right direction.” However, being seen as “a creative” can also be intimidating, Stacey notices, “If I’m an artist? I don’t know if I’m an artist. Maybe on a really small scale. It’s not like I would, I would never want that pressure of being called an artist [laughs].” Tess, on the other hand, takes delight in showing off her creativity: “And then you get to say, “I made it!” Yeah, sometimes people don’t believe I made something. And then that’s, I get a kick out of that one as well. “Oh, yes, I did. Yeah.” Ellen’s pride is influenced by the size and complexity of her work:

I feel proud to have successfully learned to make the different stitches and I find the finished product to be very pleasing to look at because of the design that the different stitches contribute to. I also like the scope of this work – it’s larger and more substantial than my previous products (hats) so the satisfaction of having created something is a bit greater.

The emergence of an artistic identity is astonishing to Anita:

Yeah, I, that’s what the most surprises me that without realizing it, that you have, I have a really profound taste. And I never realized I had that. I never realized I had a really profound taste in, in photos, or colours or paintings. And I do. [...] Yeah. I’m learning that about myself.

The second subordinate theme, “Claiming time and space, subverting midlife expectations,” depicts how the women seek to recalibrate opposing demands of caregiving, career, and creative leisure in midlife. Nicky

quit a full-time high-pressure job before relocating to the Netherlands, and now her life has a different balance:

Uhm, so, massive changes. I would say in Toronto, I kind of felt like I was drowning in suburbia, in the rat race, and I couldn't see how it was going to end well. Uhm, it was very [*pause*], yeah it was just too many demands to try and meet all of the expectations, and I felt like we would be almost at breaking point.

Midlife for Anita is a transition to thinking more about herself:

Now I am floating a little bit after [my mother's death]. I think, oh my god, because I have lots and lots of spare time. But then we're slowly starting to get ready to, uhm, to go into pension [...] And I'm thinking about maybe I should stop work, as well.

Similarly, Stacey is ready for change in how she cares for her children and herself:

They've been doing their own laundry for at least a year, if not more, because there was one day that I got pissed off. And I said, "To hell with you, you do your own shit now, I'm done!" [*laughs*]. [...] How much fun would it be for me, if I spend all of my free time cleaning the house and cooking and shopping and laundry and everything, while they get to run off and play all the time? I want play time too! [*laughs*].

Tess leaves home responsibilities at home when she goes into the workshop: "Being there really allows me to let go of everything else. And when I'm there, I'm there for one reason only." Ellen's subversion is not about time use or caregiving, but rather a disruption of long-held preconceptions of her creativity:

I have not felt very creative before. My, my kids are creative, my husband's creative. I've always felt like, well, my creativity comes out in my teaching, you know, I can make a nice PowerPoint [*laughs*]. But that's not what people... say, "what can you do?" [...] so, it's a new, yeah, to have a... well, "I knit."

The third subordinate theme, "Relinquishing control to the materials, tools, and process," reports on the joys of letting go of control during the creative process. In accepting that the materialities of arts and crafts have the ultimate control, the women find adventure, alongside discomfort and risk. Silver is an unpredictable material, as Tess explains: "There is also

the tension of waiting to see what emerges after milling, that is, are there cracks in the material, or air bubbles after casting." Nicky is improvising when she learns to cut foam: "So, again, this is a big unknown territory [...] So, you know, flying by the seat of my pants here. But I think this is the right thing to do." Ellen is confused about a tricky pattern but seems to enjoy the challenge:

I think I will try this next, even though it's daunting. I'm not even sure, you know different, like, there's this sort of chart and I don't really even know yet how to, how to figure it out [laughs]. I think it starts with... Yeah, this is, this... [pause] I'm not even sure if this is the beginning or... this the beginning [laughs].

Experimentation can be fun, despite the uncertainty, reports Stacey:

Sticky and messy, in a good way. Playful, experimental. I put layers on that I can feel with my hand and see with my eye. [...] There's also worry involved, will it work, what will the result be in the end. I can't see the end yet.

Frustration seems to be the prime emotion for Anita when talking about tools that she cannot control:

I would love to have a really thin brush that continuously letting out the paint at the same speed and not start off with a big blob and then end with nothing [...] Russ actually bought some really expensive one at a proper art shop and I think that's absolute rubbish. It don't do at all. So, because I wanted to have a precise one. And they just don't flow at all. Not at all.

The fourth subordinate theme, "Battling perfectionism and fear of failure," presents moments of insecurities and a self-imposed need for perfection. Nicky struggles with external critique: "It is not easy [...] I'm quite private and I don't really want to, you know, I don't want to be, put myself out there to be criticized or judged or - I love people to like it." Anita's critical voice is her own: "'I'm not a very secure person. So, I'm my own biggest critic.'" Tess recognises her wish for perfection: "I don't really feel scared, but more like you want to do it right. And that's probably something within myself, I want to do things right." Perfectionism makes it hard for Ellen to accept errors:

Oh, there are some places where the stitches are not quite right, or the hole is too big or, or maybe one of these big holes is not big enough, uhm. Yeah, see, you can see that there's a, it's not quite evened up. There was one where I thought when I'm done I might have to, I might have to fix it, you know just a... [...] yeah, fix it a little bit.

Stacey minimises her mistakes, both in words and actions: "So, that little oopsie could set me back a little bit [...]. Uhm [*sigh*], sometimes I might put a little distraction there to pull your attention away from my oopsie."

Discussion

The findings have demonstrated how creative leisure in midlife can provide experiences of meaningfulness for the women participating in this study. While the idiographic aspect of IPA keeps the voices of these five women ringing clear, there are some broader claims that we can point to by theoretically contextualizing our findings, using the key lenses of (super)womanhood, chrononormativity, self-directed learning, new materialism, the "double standard" of aging, the "male gaze," *méconnaissance*, and abjection.

We will first explore how creative leisure offers a counternarrative of women in midlife, shifting the focus from caregiving and perfectionism to self-care, enhancement of identity, and camaraderie. We will examine the opportunities creative leisure provides for self-directed learning (Findsen & Formosa 2011; Mezirow 1990, 1997) and look at how material entanglements are pivotal to these processes (Barad 2007; Bennet 2010; Ingold 2013). Next, we will discuss the interplay of light and dark elements of meaning within the findings. We propose that pleasure in midlife, for the study's participants, is often counterpointed by an undercurrent of darkness. To properly situate the joys of midlife creativity, we will discuss the "double standard" of aging (Sontag 1972) that can lead women to feel inhibition and shame (Gilleard & Higgs 2011), as well as examine aspects of mortality and loss relating to the aging female body (Kristeva 1982; Woodward 2006). Finally, we will outline some limitations to this study.

A Counter Narrative to the (Super)Woman and Chrononormativity: Self-Directed Learning, Material Entanglements, and Camaraderie

Society expects mid-age women to be productive members of the workforce while also caring for multiple generations of family members, subscribing to chrononormativities and sexist roles (Freeman 2010; Gullette 1988; Pickard 2016). Women in midlife often feel like they need to justify their choice of how to spend their time, internalize guilt when prioritizing leisure over caregiving, and judge themselves against a (super)womanhood image (Fullagar 2008). We suggest that the participants of our study find creative leisure as a way to counter some of these long-held societal, and internalized, expectations. This can be demonstrated when Stacey objects to the status quo, exclaiming, "I want play time too!," and Nicky quits the "rat race" of a career that threatens her life-work balance to pursue art and upholstery making. Jewelry making and knitting (respectively) give Tess and Ellen the opportunity to let go of control, relinquishing the lead to the materials and processes of their crafts, and learning to embrace mistakes and accidents as integral and welcome, in ways that careers and caregiving rarely afford. Anita is at a crossroads in her life, where the caregiving load has been lifted and she can, for once, focus on developing her own talent and voice.

To engage in their creative leisure occupations, the women engage in self-directed learning, whether it is attending a community class, watching a friend to teach a new skill, visiting a store staffed by experts, or seeking online tutorials. Findsen and Formosa (2011) relate lifelong learning to personal fulfilment and self-growth, contributing to the development and maintenance of the ontological primary identity, the "self." We suggest that the women in this study experience learning their creative leisure as an impetus for growth and "becoming," describing new roles, skills, and relationships that have emerged as a result (Mezirow 1990), and providing glimpses of new self-reflective insights (Mezirow 1997). To Anita's surprise, taking drawing classes for the first time in her sixties has made her realize that she has "profound taste," while Ellen newly identifies as creative, now that she is "becoming a knitter." Tess hones her self-confidence and competence by sharing knowledge with peers, alternating between the roles of student and teacher in a community workshop. Nicky,

finding her way in a new land, seeks mentors to help her become a more skilled upholsteress, and Stacey signs up for workshops to progress in the craft that was a lifeline when she was seriously ill. We interpret that these processes align with what Mezirow (1990) coins perspective transformation, a process relating to adult learning that involves exploration and provisional efforts of acquiring new skills and trying out new roles. Often triggered by life crises or other affecting experiences and involving disorienting self-examination and dark feelings, perspective transformation can “challenge the premise of our belief systems or habits of expectation” (Mezirow 1990: 146). Creative leisure thus brings not only pleasure but serves as a site of identity transformation and skill formation in the third age.

The women all report embodied pleasures arising from entanglements with materialities of arts and crafts. These joyful visual, tactile, and spatial experiences, invoke Bramble (2015), who found that sensorial pleasure is important to overall well-being. The double hermeneutic of the IPA led us to examine the insights generated by these experiences. While the participants describe their creative encounters in humanist terms, our analysis revealed how materials actively shaped this “becoming.” This aligns with a new materialist perspective that can help us understand the role of the environment in shaping the women’s embodied experiences of arts and crafts, and the meanings they derive from them. Barad (2007) views the world as entangled, an ongoing process where “matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together” (p. 3). We interpret that Stacey demonstrates this by keeping her aunt’s memory alive through incorporating scavenged objects, a tin of buttons and old paper, into her craft. Tess’s sensual description of the responsive silver becoming shinier with every step of polishing, evokes Bennett (2010), who delves into the agency and active participation of non-human actants, describing the relationship as an intricate dance between the human and non-human, always mingling together in a “swarm of vitalities at play” (p. 32). The materialities of creative leisure are active participants, alongside the women, each with its vital force, forming an assemblage which unfolds through entangled processes of “becoming with,” both human and non-human (Barad 2007). We suggest that such a process takes place in Ellen’s craft, as the yarn the knitter merge to “become” one. The maker moves from acting like an alchemist and joins forces with the material to follow its flow

intuitively in “a lifetime of intimate gestural and sensory engagement” (Ingold 2013: 29), as we believe that Nicky demonstrates when she improvises cutting foam. Anita’s measure of a good paintbrush is how, when a skilled hand grips the right tool, they come together to make the art flow, a “correspondence of gesture and inscription, of hand and line” (Ingold 2013: 122). These anecdotes exemplify how tools, products, technologies, and environments of creative leisure are all active participants in the pleasurable, risky, and transformative moments depicted in this study.

The participants all seek continuity and camaraderie between others on similar quests. Friendship in context of leisure is often a motivating factor, as friends can offer support, encouragement, and rituals of engagement around the activity (Fullagar 2008). Ridgeway (2024) identified that women’s leisure occupations in midlife that are experienced both through the body and by kinship with others have deep emotional and transformative impact. Subverting the (super)woman and chrononormative narrative, which emphasizes perfectionism and selfless dedication to others, engaging in tangible creative leisure occupations that provide embodied, sensorial, and social entanglements, as well as later-life learning opportunities, present the women of this study with new pleasurable, playful, transformative, and meaningful ways of not just “successfully working through” midlife, but flourishing in it.

An Undercurrent of Darkness: Experiencing the “Double Standard” of Aging, the “Male Gaze,” Méconnaissance, and Abjection

The findings point to an intriguing interplay regarding meaningful experiences that arise through women’s creative leisure in midlife. While the women clearly find various moments of happy pleasure in their leisure, there are also darker thoughts and musings, as well as internalized negative self-beliefs, that course underneath. We propose that the joys of sensory material entanglements, skilled movements, intimate friendships, and self-growth through lifelong learning during arts and crafts collect deeper meanings when juxtaposed against the darker aspects of the human condition, and especially the gendered experiences of transversing midlife under the “double standard” of aging as a woman (Sontag 1972).

Each woman shared a unique glimpse of how they experience their bodies as imperfect, inhibited, and mortal. All of them are dealing with losses and transitions of some kind, whether it is the death of a loved one, serious illness, migration, or children about to leave the nest. Hints of shame, sadness, fear, and internalized ageism make subtle appearances in the women's stories, easy to miss amid the pleasures of creative leisure, yet accumulating at the background of their narratives. We propose that the mere presence of such darkness gives the joyful moments a more nuanced meaning, just as shadows give substance and depth to light. These interplays – life and death, growth and fear, intimacy and loss, pleasure and shame – are not opposites; rather, they depend on each other and are forces in their own right, generating a “creative friction” – the energy that emerges from their interaction.

Stacey found her craft through the self-soothing motion of pushing paper around the table while trying to cope with cancer and mortality. This supports that engaging in creative art in context of cancer can be helpful, as per Reynolds and Lim (2007), who reported that making art helped women with cancer sustain hope for the future, cope with pain and nausea, deal with sleepless nights, and maintain self-worth and identity. Stacey found that embodied entanglement with the materiality of her craft – paper – was more than a mindless action. Rather, we interpret that it was a tangible way to process dark emotions and the vulnerability of accepting her mortality, while also providing a pathway back to enjoying the parts of life that were most meaningful: her creativity and relationships.

Beyond thoughts of mortality, however, the women all expressed variations of feeling unseen, their bodies unsightly, and a source of shame. Sontag (1972) posited that women's bodies are experienced as ruined, obscene, and disgusting in their aging. To have a body that is showing physical signs of getting older elicits an awareness of abjection, a term introduced and linked to the woman's maternal body by Kristeva (1982). The notion of abjection was extended by Gilleard and Higgs (2011) to the dreaded social imaginary of the “fourth age,” invoking an image of a weak and frail body that lacks intent, and therefore self-control. In the midlife intersection of ageism and sexism, women experience that “the visible markers of grey hair, wrinkles, and sagging skin [are] the physical determinants of social invisibility” (Clarke & Griffin 2008: 669).

One reading of Anita and Ellen's surprise at their aging selves reflected back in the "mirror" of photography can be interpreted as forms of *méconnaissance*. As Anita's mother has just passed away and Ellen is preparing for an empty nest, we suggest that a changing guard of generations might be on their minds. Woodward (2006) extended Lacan's concept of *méconnaissance* to describe such upsetting experiences of misrecognition and disconnection from one's reflected appearances in midlife and beyond, which are rooted in an altered relationship between the mind and the body and result in a perceived abjectness of the aging body that contributes to isolation and social invisibility in later life. Misrecognizing oneself as one's mother can be an unsettling experience that links middle age to loss and mortality.

Both women experience pleasure in their respective arts and crafts, yet the sight of their startlingly unrecognizable bodies performing them gives them pause. This brings important attention to the need for care in using photo elicitation as a research method. While the participants of this study provided informed consent to the use of the method, their surprised reactions nonetheless remind us of potential momentary discomfort that can arise from such visual confrontations.

Marshall (2012), however, builds on Woodward (2006) by adding a positive element, and advocates for making *méconnaissance* explicit, as it serves a larger societal purpose of constructing an alternative narrative to aging by presenting its positive potential for renewal and transformation. Rather than hide the aging body from sight and discourse and emphasizing its abjectness, engaging with experiences of *méconnaissance* energizes a discourse where "the losses of aging [are] accompanied by what a person gains by advancing through time: new experiences, new ideas, and long-term connections with people and events" (Marshall 2012: 69). And indeed, Ellen's embodied joys of immersion and sensual engagement with the tools and materials of knitting, and Anita's delight in new learning and increased skill in drawing, both suggest to us a counterpoint to the negative narrative of the midlife body as abject, disconnected, and lacking pleasure.

It is not just aging and mortality that makes the sight of one's own body's upsetting, but also seeing it in action, especially for women who have internalized sexist ageism and appropriated the youthful structure of look (Woodward 2006), which leads to distancing oneself from one's mirror image in older age, quite literally. Tess is self-conscious about

her crouching posture, captioning it “inelegant.” This speaks to a larger issue of the objectifying “male gaze” (Mulvey 1975), which has been internalized by many women, leaving them feeling dissatisfied of their appearance and experiencing insecurities and body shame (Dolezal 2016). Particularly when observed in action, many women find it difficult to move freely and unself-consciously, with their body comportment and flow impeded by their experienced objectification (Young 1980), “making movements uncertain, unconfident, and limited” (Dolezal 2016: 57). A considerable number of women in midlife are subjected to the “double standard” of aging that causes them to strive for an eternally youthful body, praised for its physically frail femininity, rather than to develop the ability to “do” or perform skilled activities, which is the way that men of their age are judged for. We interpret that this deeply ingrained self-consciousness makes it hard for Tess to fully enjoy observing herself in a photo, making it even more meaningful that she experienced it so freely and joyously when it occurred, and constituting a valuable transgression of the abject and aged body assumption (Gilleard & Higgs 2011).

Shame and inhibition are also evident in Nicky’s narrative. Although not directly related to her artistic leisure occupations, the mention of smell in the art studio transports her thoughts to another type of leisure, going to the spa, evoking feelings of uneasiness and shame, contrasted by relaxation and bodily joy. This anecdote points to a link between smell and experiences of shame, a relationship which was explained by Classen et al. (2002), who believe that western society has marginalized and denigrated the sense of smell due to an association with primitive societies and the shame of bodily odors, particularly in regard to women. Returning to the notion of abjection (Kristeva 1982), it is women whose maternal bodies are seen as impure, leaky, and weak, thus deserving of social exclusion (Gilleard & Higgs 2011). Across western societies, “women are suspected of being naturally foul, reeking of unpleasant body fluids, such as menstrual blood” (Classen et al. 2002: 164). We interpret that the juxtaposition of an inhibited versus a relaxed female body that has immense capacity of sensual awareness and pleasure (Brown 2019), as evoked through Nicky’s creative leisure, points to a liberating potential for women in midlife to move away from internalized feelings of bodily shame and disgust to a blissful state of effortless sensual pleasure.

Limitations

The use of purposeful sampling presents risk for selection bias; however, it allowed for a fairly defined and homogeneous group of “arts and crafters” that share personal reference to the research topic (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014). The study’s sample size ($N = 5$) is arguably a strength rather than limitation, as it allowed for detailed microanalysis and examination of the particularities of each participant (Sandelowski 1995). The small and purposeful sample is congruent with IPA, which prioritizes depth, subtlety, and “thick descriptions” that allow for naturalistic and idiographic, rather than statistical, generalizations (Brocki & Wearden 2006; Smith et al. 2009; Tavakol & Sandars 2025).

The method of photo elicitation proved momentarily confronting to some of the participants, despite giving informed consent that they would be viewing images of themselves in action. Future studies may find helpful insights in Copes et al. (2018), who emphasize the need to be sensitive to participants’ emotional reactions and comfort levels of seeing themselves in photo-elicitation images, balanced by the deep insights that can be gained using this method.

Conclusion

The five women in midlife participating in this study engage in various arts and crafts, including drawing, jewelry making, knitting, paper crafts, and upholstery, all tangible leisure activities that involve material, spatial, temporal, and social engagements, resulting in experiences that are highly embodied, sensorial, and emplaced in distinct physical and social environments. The findings reveal that the participants experience a wide array of meaningful pleasures: sensual embodied delights, immersive sensations, transformative play, adventurous risk taking, new relationships, and exploration of identities. Our study confirms that leisure in midlife provides women with meaningful experiences of pleasure, playfulness, and deeply personal ways to live through this life phase on one’s own personal clock, rather than feel bound to societal expectations and chrononormativities.

Alongside the pleasurable experiences, however, we bring attention to challenging aspects of aging across midlife as a woman. Internalized ageism and sexism, chrononormativity, and pressure to “age successfully”

while being a caregiving (super)woman, are present in all the women's stories, providing elements of shame, abjectness, and unease, yet nonetheless important sources of meaning, as well. Our study adds an understanding of how engagement in creative leisure in midlife enables the fullness of the human condition to come forth, acknowledging both the darker and disturbing emotions as well as the bright bursts of pleasure, playfulness, and transformation that are within its potential, the tensions between dark and light creating a dynamic instability that drives the creative emergence. Rather than being static opposites, they exist in constant dialogue, each defining and giving meaning to the other. This interplay helps us paint a nuanced and multilayered picture of how women in midlife experience meaningful pleasure through creative leisure occupations, countering hegemonic narratives of this life stage.

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