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Midlife Prosodies at the Age-Gender Interface

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Abstract

Middle age remains an understudied life stage, as research has long prioritised the young-old divide and sidelined the middle decades despite their centrality in the life course. Although recent scholarly and cultural debates suggest renewed interest in this period, these developments coexist with persistent ageism, whose gendered nature is well established: middle-aged women are evaluated more harshly than men, especially in relation to appearance, behaviour, and social expectations. This study investigates the labels *middle-aged* and *midlife* in a large corpus of English discourse to examine how they are applied to women and men, and whether they reproduce, negotiate, or challenge dominant stereotypes. Drawing on work in ageism and gendered ageing, and treating age labels as categorisation devices, the analysis adopts a corpus-based approach to explore how discourse shapes shared representations of middle age. The findings show that stereotypical and chrononormative portrayals dominate: women are disproportionately linked to decline-oriented framings, while men appear in more varied but still norm-reinforcing depictions. Emerging alternative representations – primarily associated with the label *midlife*, though not used exclusively in reframing contexts – signal some diversification, yet remain too scattered to amount to a meaningful redefinition. Moreover, the very need to rename middle age in order to reframe it suggests that negative representations persist alongside more positive ones, with traits associated with the latter running the risk of imposing new forms of chrononormativity as constraining as those they attempt to replace.

Whatever happens in the body, human beings are aged by culture first of all.

(Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture*)

1. Middle Age between stereotypes and reframing

This article investigates the construction of middle age, and more specifically of middle-aged men and women, in contemporary discourse in English. To do so, it analyses the collocational profiles of the adjectives *middle-aged* and *midlife* in their function as age characterization devices, with the aim of identifying their associated attributes and the semantic prosodies they convey.

As an age category, middle age is in many ways underdetermined. While there is general agreement in the academic literature that it covers roughly the years between forty and sixty – with some scholars setting the beginning as early as thirty-five (Baltes, et al. 1999), and others pushing the upper limit to sixty-five (Lachman, et al. 2015) – outside academia it does not appear to be univocally defined or indeed understood, either chronologically or in terms of its socio-cultural implications. Since there are no "clear cultural or biological markers of onset and cessation" (Heath 2009, 5) of middle age, the concept remains largely elusive, and it risks being conflated with old age when ascribed to the same macro-category of 'aging.' This has resulted in the elision of middle age from most discussions of life-stages, which have frequently remained locked in a "binary of young versus old" (Heath 2009, 11), thus *de facto* preventing a meaningful reflection on middle age.

Recently, however, interest in middle age – or, more specifically, in specific categories of middle-aged people, such as patients, voters, and above all consumers – would appear to have increased. With life expectancy steadily rising (despite the temporary stall due to the COVID-19 pandemic), middle age has expanded upwards: as Lloyd has put it, "young is getting older, old is getting older, and middle-age is expanding" (2019, np); indeed, for most individuals, middle age is now likely to be by far "the longest segment of life" (Cohen 2012, 15).

It is therefore not surprising that lately this life-stage category has been drawing scholarly attention in multiple domains, from health and wellbeing to marketing, from media to advertising. In the health domain, for instance, recent studies have emphasized the distinct – and intensifying – physiological and psychosocial characteristics of middle age, which set it apart from both younger and especially older cohorts (Santos, et al. 2025; Ng, et al. 2024). In the marketing field, middle-aged customers are now considered a strategically crucial consumer segment which is best addressed through refined, non-stereotypical targeting (Yannopoulou, et al. 2023), and more nuanced representation of middle-aged men and women (both reflecting and encouraging a change in attitude towards them) have also been observed in media and advertising literature. Nonetheless, negative stereotyping persists (Camacho-Markina and Santos-Diez 2025), ageism remaining "one of the last socially acceptable prejudices" (Weir 2023, 36); attempts to portray older people (including middle-aged individuals) in a more positive light appear to be only partly successful, with these demographics continuing to feel largely misrepresented in public discourses (Rosenthal, et al. 2021).

The emergence of middle age as a life stage worthy of specific attention is welcome news though the concept itself remains fraught with potential contradictions. While, on the one hand, it continues to be stereotypically portrayed (and therefore perceived) as the "beginning of the end" in a person's life course, on the other it is also represented as a period having "more in common with youth than age" (Featherstone and Hepworth 1988, 383), endowed with "a new

vocabulary of motives" (Featherstone and Hepworth 1988, 384) revolving around the concept of the "unrelenting body" (Grenier 2012, 92; see also Hepworth 2003; Coupland 2003) – a fixation with maintaining a youthful look even as old age creeps on.

Even when youthful looks are not explicitly prescribed, it is possible to detect a growing pressure on middle-aged and older individuals to perform youthful attitudes in ways that exceed the conventional 'young in spirit' adagio. A telling example is a recent UK advertising campaign by HSBC (#HSBCOpenQuestions), which portrayed a group of middle-aged – indeed, edging towards older – women preparing to do something rather unexpected for their demographic: skydiving. In one iteration displayed in a major international airport, the campaign was presented through a pair of coordinated posters. The first captured the women just as they jumped, their bodies tense and their expressions marked by apprehension; the second showed them smiling mid-dive, arms interlocked in a circle as they descended before their parachutes opened. The accompanying taglines framed the contrast explicitly: the first poster read "Midlife – crisis," while the second countered with "or opportunity?" If casting (stereotypically) age-non-conforming behaviour as a *crisis* points to the violation of a shared norm of age-appropriateness, its reframing as an *opportunity* underscores the need to move beyond such prescriptive expectations and embrace a more open conception of age.

This reframing of the midlife *crisis* into a midlife *opportunity* bears clear testimony to the ongoing attempt to redefine the middle and later years of life in a more positive light than has been customary for over half a century. Indeed, the very reference to 'midlife crisis' – whose dominance in contemporary culture tends to obscure its relatively recent origin – highlights the historical specificity of current perceptions of middle age, which, besides reinforcing the poor reputation of this life stage as the onset of old age, conflate the sense of approaching age-related decline with experiences of anxiety, depression, and, at times, incongruous attempts to fend off such decline, such as those hinted at in the advertisement described above.

It is worth noticing that the now-ubiquitous notion of a *midlife crisis* is far from timeless, despite its entrenched presence in contemporary discourse. The term first appeared in Jacques's (1965) article "Death and the Midlife Crisis." Before that, crisis was not considered a defining feature of middle age: well into the Victorian period, middle age was still regarded as the peak of a man's life – a gendered formulation that reflects the assumptions of the time, with women assumed to enter middle age around the age of thirty, when they were either married, ideally with children, or destined to the social failure of spinsterhood. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did a more pessimistic view begin to emerge, with midlife (understood for men to begin at around forty) increasingly cast as the onset of decline and proximity to old age (Heath 2009). This shift, however, did not yet construe the period as a crisis.

Jacques (1965) departed from this earlier understanding by arguing that the imminence of senescence triggered a full-blown crisis in midlife men – or, more precisely, in the small group of male artists he analysed. This conceptualisation of midlife as a transitional period marked by anxiety and self-reassessment was later generalised by Levinson (1978), although his study also focused exclusively on white, middle-class men. It is therefore unsurprising that the notion of a midlife crisis has been most strongly associated with this demographic: a crisis affecting white, middle-aged men, frequently caricatured through behaviours such as acquiring a younger partner, a sports car, or both. In light of this, the reference to midlife crisis in an ad featuring older women is especially significant, as it challenges not only assumptions of age-appropriateness, but also of gender-typicality – both in terms of the midlife crisis cliché, and in respect of the activity featured, women being less likely than men to be represented doing extreme sports despite recent – and welcome – developments in what has come to be known as "femvertising" (Åkestam, et al. 2017).

The latter point brings to the fore another key aspect of midlife discourse: for women, ageing has been almost exclusively framed as loss. Dominant discourses around female ageing invariably tend to "artificially conflat[e] menopause with decline," turning "a normal biological process" into "a narrative of loss: of physical strength; of emotional stability; and of sexual attractiveness" (Anderson 2021, 77). Not a crisis of the type experienced by their male counterparts, maybe – but hardly something to look forward to, and an even starker, if possible, reminder that one's lifecycle is drawing to an end, more with a whimper than with a bang.

A full account of the way in which midlife has been framed and discussed over the decades is beyond the scope of this article. Without going into details, it is fair to say that negative stereotyping dominated the best part of the past century, persisting also into the current one (see, for instance, Gatlin, et al. 2014). At the same time, calls for "updating midlife" (Montero, et al. 2013) have been around for over thirty years now, and over time there has been – in the academic literature at least – a "modernisation of ageing" resulting in the conceptualization of "a new middle age" as an extended, fluid, period in the life-course characterised by personal development, activity and growth (Featherstone and Hepworth 1988, 385). The establishment of paradigms of "productive" (Butler, et al. 1990), "healthy" or "successful" (Rowe and Kahn 1998) ageing have also contributed to the reframing of midlife, though these paradigms as well come with their own problems (see Martinson and Berridge 2015, amongst others), not least the fact that ageing "successfully" is often the result of a privileged life to begin with (Åberg, et al. 2020).

The shifting conceptualization of midlife outlined above confirms what has been argued for quite some time now – that age is not simply a biological fact, but a cultural construct shaped by historically specific narratives, which are different for men and women. Thus, while it is

undoubtedly true that, as Gullette (2004, 47) has observed, both men and women are "aged by culture first of all," women bear the extra burden of what Sontag (1972) famously defined as "the double standard of ageing," which makes ageing, for them, more consequential, and often more punitive, than for men (Coupland 2007). This is confirmed by recent research, which has found that such asymmetry remains deeply embedded. In particular, large comparative studies show that women are still perceived to enter old age earlier than men, reflecting a persistent cultural bias in ageing judgments (Settersten, et al. 2020). Additionally, gendered ageism continues to render older women less visible and more heavily penalized for bodily change: for instance, grey hair and other age markers (which do not suddenly appear in old age, but become progressively visible in midlife) are routinely coded negatively for women but positively for men (Rochon, et al. 2021). All this makes it all the more important to include a gendered perspective in the exploration of the discursive construction of midlife.

2. Theoretical and methodological background, materials and study design

2.1 Theoretical and methodological background

In exploring the construction of middle age along the gender interface in contemporary discourse in English from a linguistic perspective, this article aims to fill a gap in the literature on ageing and gender first mentioned by Hamilton in 1992, when she claimed that "language, gender and aging [were] not being addressed simultaneously within the same scholarly studies" (1992, 240). This remains true, to an extent at least, to this day: while the discourses of age and gender have separately been attracting considerable scholarly attention on the part of linguists for some time now, their intersection has received much less attention. As recently as 2023, Caldas-Coulthard (2023, 236) lamented that the topic of ageism, which she describes as "an ideology and practice much more resistant to change" than sexism, "continues to be rarely addressed within critical discourse analysis and gender studies." Recently, a small but growing body of research has been addressing this "surprising omission" (2023, 236), a prime example of which is Caldas-Coulthard's 2023 paper itself, which looks at the intersection of ageism and sexism in the representation of older women, adding a semiotic perspective to linguistic evidence. An earlier study by Moon (2014), which offers illuminating insights into customary characterizations of women across the life course, also deserves special mention.

These studies come in the wake of a sizeable tradition of research in ageist discourse, with early, influential examples dating back to the 1990s (Nikander 2000; Ylänne-McEwen 1999; Raz 1995; Coupland and Nussbaum 1993; Coupland and Coupland 1993; Coupland, et al. 1991), followed by many more. Among these is a 2007 study by Mautner investigating the use of the

term *elderly* in the Bank of English corpus – an analysis which is crucial for the present research because of the methodological perspective adopted here. Her work stands as one of the earliest demonstrations of the value of corpus-linguistic approaches for investigating social representations in general and age-related representations in particular. Building on insights from earlier research showing how the life span is arbitrarily carved up into stages to which specific values are attributed (William and Giles 1998), Mautner highlights the role of language and discourse in defining life-stage boundaries beyond mere chronological aspects, with age-related expressions "shap[ing] both people's identities and interpersonal relationships" (2007, 53). Through her analysis of life-stage labels, Mautner demonstrates how their functioning as categorization devices (i.e. linguistic tools that help us place people in membership categories to which certain attributes and routine behaviors are associated) is steeped in, and dependent on, language use. Her findings underscore how linguistic expressions activate shared assumptions about individuals assigned to a given social category through a specific label.

The notion of membership category, first introduced by sociologist and ethnographer Harvey Sacks in his seminal work on how people make sense of their and other people's behaviors (1992) is central to Mautner's discussion. Sacks observes that whenever we engage in social interaction, we immediately – and inevitably – categorize people in terms of attributes such as race, gender and age, to name but the most obvious ones. For instance, if, in the course of a conversation, a speaker uses the expression 'at my age,' or 'as a woman,' they are clearly making age and gender relevant to the interaction. The phrase 'at my age' evokes different sets of characteristics considered typical of that specific age group or life stage, depending on what aspect of 'age' is salient in conversation. By way of example, a person in their forties may say, 'At my age, I should be a home owner.' The category 'person in their forties' is here understood as having the characteristic of being expected to have earned enough money to get onto the property ladder, and failure to do so is interpreted as a lamentable deviance from a commonly accepted norm – a norm whose validity the speaker recognizes as 'common-sense knowledge.'

Membership categories can of course also be resisted and even challenged, but they nonetheless retain their normative power insofar as they are recognized as the benchmark against which that very resistance and challenges are measured. Thus, when women in their late forties reclaim their right to be first-time mothers, they are opening resisting chrononormativity (Freeman 2010), which sets the upper limit of 'ideal motherhood' at around thirty-five. In doing so, they are rejecting the social categorization of 'women past childbearing age' according to which they have been traditionally classified. At the same time, though, in so far as they feel the need to insist that "it is never too late to become a mother," they acknowledge the continuing power of "the temporal norms that benchmark the appropriate time for lifespan […] transition" (Ylänne and Nikander 2019, 468).

Building on these insights, the present study adopts a corpus-linguistic approach to examine how gendered categories of middle age are discursively constructed in contemporary English. Following Mautner's demonstration of the analytical potential of corpus methods for uncovering the implicit assumptions encoded in life-stage labels, I use corpus evidence to identify the recurrent linguistic features, collocational patterns, and semantic prosodies associated with middle-aged women and men. These data-driven patterns function as empirically grounded indicators of the membership categories through which gendered middle age is made socially meaningful. Once identified, these features are subjected to critical discourse analysis in order to interrogate the normative assumptions, value attributions, and chrononormative expectations that underpin them. In this way, corpus methods serve as an entry point for mapping the linguistic terrain of gendered middle age, while critical analysis provides the interpretive lens through which to assess how such categories are produced, naturalised, or contested in discourse.

2.2 Materials and study design

The study takes its cue from anecdotal evidence found in a small but growing number of editorials (discussed in Section 3.1 below) which points to an emerging discourse of mature adulthood grounded in the differentiation of multiple types of 'middle age' to which people in this life stage were willing – or unwilling – to self-ascribe. In particular, these editorials highlighted a growing resistance to identifying as middle-aged, and a parallel search for alternative self-definitions. What appeared to be new in these texts was the explicit call for a redefinition of the category 'middle age' so as to better capture the changing contemporary features of this life stage and of the people – men and women – who reluctantly inhabited it. This, in turn, raised the question of what kinds of representations – embedded and reproduced in discourse – middle-aged individuals felt they could no longer identify with.

Answering this question required moving beyond anecdotal evidence and – following Mautner's (2007) example – examining how middle age is constructed across contemporary English discourse more broadly. To ensure reliable findings, the investigation needed to be carried out on a corpus of substantial size. The EnTenTen21 corpus available on the SketchEngine platform (Kilgariff, et al. 2014; Kilgariff, et al. 2004) was selected for this purpose. It consists of a 52-billion-word collection of English-language texts spanning a wide variety of genres and discourses, downloaded in October-December 2021 and January 2022. Owing to its composition, the EnTenTen21 corpus is highly representative of contemporary English discourse across multiple domains. These can be selectively included or excluded for more fine-tuned analysis, thus enabling cross-domain comparison. In the present study, this opportunity was used only sparingly, as the aim was to examine discursive constructions of

middle age across the board; however, dominant domains were noted and attention was paid to their potential over-representation in the findings (see Section 3).

The analysis was conducted using the text-analysis tools provided by the platform, which enabled the extraction of salient patterns for the nouns *man* and *woman* when modified by *middle-aged* or *midlife*, or when occurring in the vicinity of prepositional phrases such as *in/at midlife*. Because the analysis focused on the collocational profiles of multi-word expressions, two complementary SketchEngine functions were used to retrieve collocates. The Collocations tool was employed to identify adjectival collocates, as its window-based statistics are particularly effective in detecting modifiers occurring immediately adjacent to the phrase. It is also suitable for retrieving instances of given nodes within a specified span (e.g. *man* or *woman* within five words to the right or left of *midlife*, thus yielding expressions such as *men in/at midlife* or *during midlife, men*).

By contrast, Word Sketches were used to analyse syntactically defined relations, especially verbs taking the target phrase as subject or object. Since Word Sketches rely on dependency parsing, they provide more robust and reliable information on verbal behaviour. The combination of these tools makes it possible to capture both the lexical environment and the grammatical behaviour of the phrases examined. Finally, the platform's function for retrieving extended co-text enabled a qualitative analysis of selected concordance lines, which was carried out with reference to – and in the light of – the critical literature discussed earlier in this section.

3. The age/gender interface: *midlife/middle-aged men* and *women*

3.1 Midlife vs middle-aged

In the opening sections of this article, I have used *midlife* and *middle-age(d)* interchangeably though I have suggested that the two are not full synonyms. The reason for making a distinction between the two terms is probably intuitive to most people happening to inhabit this life stage: more often than not, one is quite happy to define oneself as *midlife* – but *middle-aged*?

As mentioned in Section 2.2, there is evidence that discomfort with the *middle-aged* label has, in recent years, become not only widespread but also markedly more explicit. In a 2023 article, *The Guardian* columnist Anita Chaudhuri suggested that the life-stage of middle age was disappearing. While social changes (including deteriorating job market conditions preventing the attainment of the financial security that was once one of hallmarks of middle age) largely accounted for its demise, she noted that people were reluctant to call themselves *middle-aged* because they perceived the label as being evaluatively charged – and not in a positive way:

> Researching this article, I was struck by the fact that not a single person I spoke to was happy to own the badge of middle age. But back in the day, the term was viewed as a state rather than a trait. A person was middle-aged because that was their actual stage of life, not simply labelled as such because they were uncreative, tedious or, heaven forfend, unproductive. (Chaudhuri 2023)

About a year earlier, another article – this time in *The Times* – had pointed out that

> middle age […] is now generally referred to as midlife, partly for the usual rebranding reasons (let's make normal seem modern), but mainly because a lot of the people hurtling through the middle part of life towards the end part don't feel middle age describes their not-really-ageing-much experience. You may be old enough to have adult children, grandchildren, hip replacements, hair loss, even a Freedom Pass, but "middle-aged" is for those other grey people, not someone who can do a yoga wheel pose and camp with their kids at Latitude. (Watson 2022)

These excerpts suggest that the discomfort surrounding the *middle-aged* label has become perhaps not more widespread, but certainly more explicit, to the point that forms of rebranding are now perceived as necessary. This heightened unease calls for closer examination of how 'being middle-aged' is constructed in discourse, with particular attention to the prevalence of stereotypical representations and to possible signs that these are being challenged – whether through alternative labels, such as *midlife*, or through shifts in evaluative framing. Within this context, and in light of the evidence outlined above that ageism operates differently for men and women, adopting a gender-sensitive perspective becomes not only relevant but essential for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

3.1.1 Being middle-aged: frumpy women and balding men

A corpus-based analysis of the adjectival collocates of *middle-aged woman* and *middle-aged man* respectively, carried out, as described in Section 3.1., using the 'Collocations' functions of SketchEngine starting from concordance lines for the two phrases, suggests that prevailing characterizations of middle age are indeed, at least partly, gender-specific. Tables 1 and 2 below show the adjectives that most frequently co-occur with each of the two categories.

'middle-aged woman' (0.28 per million)

collocate	freq	coll. freq.	logdice
frumpy	24	7669	4.99619
plump	73	72099	4.74716
well-dressed	29	21641	4.62118
dowdy	16	5914	4.51782
dumpy	13	6968	4.1533
heavyset	10	3303	4.01451

'middle-aged man' (0.46 per million)

collocate	freq	coll. freq.	logdice
balding	239	23492	7.24034
scarlet-clad	50	205	5.84478
portly	67	12321	5.75604
paunchy	46	2249	5.62458
well-dressed	60	21641	5.29887
burly	68	34881	5.14019

portly	11	12321	3.62116
overweight	93	232130	3.61278
matronly	8	5092	3.57059
mousy	8	6078	3.50752
stern-looking	6	817	3.46626
buxom	9	10238	3.43808
stout	43	114649	3.42023
pudgy	9	11154	3.39031
heavy-set	6	2776	3.31554
stocky	11	23198	3.1656
chubby	15	42745	3.04104
graying	8	15239	3.02473
menopausal	5	3395	3.00798
bespectacled	7	11699	3.00005

Tab. 1: Most frequent collocates of 'middle-aged woman'

graying	40	15239	4.91181
stocky	41	23198	4.70524
bearded	78	74838	4.63114
greying	26	9052	4.51143
pudgy	27	11154	4.48689
black-haired	22	7303	4.3396
overweight	158	232130	4.31323
plump	54	72099	4.13946
bespectacled	20	11699	4.03414
purple-robed	14	378	3.99955
heavy-set	15	2776	3.98324
heavyset	15	3303	3.95898
bald	86	158108	3.91814
stout	62	114649	3.82903

Tab. 2: Most frequent collocates of 'middle-aged man'

In both cases, allowing for obvious differences (men are not typically *buxom* or *matronly*, and women are seldom *balding*) and with the exception of the positively connotated *well-dressed* and the neutral *bearded*, the set of adjectives associated with the two categories is hardly flattering for the standards of today's culture. Middle age appears to be the time when both men and women put on weight, and women – while being occasionally well-dressed – no longer keep up with fashion trends (*frumpy*, *dowdy*), while *graying* hair and (reading?) glasses (*bespectacled*) (clear signs of ageing, seldom appreciated in an ageist society like the one we live in) become the norm for both sexes. While graying hair is a fact of life (and, as such, references to it may be argued to be purely denotative), it is hardly disputable (despite emerging trends encouraging women to embrace their gray hair) that hair dying specifically to hide grays is a widespread practice most women resort to upon spotting the first ones. Similarly, and – again – despite the increasing fashionableness of glasses, actually having to wear them because of the onset of short-sightedness is often seen – and perceived – as an unwelcome sign of ageing.

The adjectives associated with *middle-aged* can be considered, as Moon (2014, 6) observes, "secondary age-markers," and, as such, "constituting a covert category or 'cryptotype' (Whorf 1956), signalling age indirectly," thereby playing a key role in establishing age-related stereotypes. That this is the case can be easily tested by looking, in turn, at the collocational patterns of these adjectives in the EnTenTen21 corpus, specifically in the pattern *adj* and/or*. Take, for instance, *frumpy*. Not only does it tend to cluster with several of the other adjectives featuring in the list above (*dowdy* (logDice 9.4), *dumpy* (logDice 9.2) and *matronly* (logDice 8.5)), but it also doubles down on the stereotyping by being associated with *mumsy* (logDice 6.8), *unstylish* (logDice 6.8), *uncool* (logDice 6.2) and *lumpy* (logDice 5.9). On the male side, *balding* co-occurs with the by now familiar *bespectacled* (logDice 8.9), *paunchy* (logDice 8.8), *portly*

(logDice 8.6), *middle-aged* (logDice 8.4), *pudgy* (logDice 8.4), *overweight* (logDice 7.6), *bearded* (logDice 7.4) and *stocky* (logDice 7.2), as well as *rotund* (logDice 7.6), *pot-bellied* (logDice 7.6) and – somewhat surprisingly – *clean-shaven* (logDice 7.6). For both middle-aged men and women there appears therefore to be a well-defined set of adjectives whose semantic prosodies (Sinclair 1991) are for the most part negative. As for verb patterns (retrieved via the Word Sketch function of SketchEngine; see Section 2.2), they display much looser dependencies, with low logDice scores; besides *wear*, which occurs in descriptions of both men (logDice 3.2) and women (lodDice 2.0), and verbs such as *narrate* (logDice 1.4) for women and *converse* (logDice 4.0) for men, we find *grapple* (logDice 1.8) and *cling* (logDice 1.4) for women, and *lust* (logDice 3.9), *accost* (logDice 3.6) and *stagger* (logDice 3.2) for men. These syntactic associations are too weak to be significant, but besides the purely descriptive ones (*wear*), they align with stereotyped gender roles – including oversexualized ones in the case of men.

In the light of the above, it is hardly surprising that both men and women who are, chronologically speaking, middle-aged, do not feel at ease with this life-stage label. The two newspaper excerpts quoted at the beginning of this section (singled out among many) suggest that they either reject life-stage labels altogether (hence the 'disappearing' life-stage mentioned by Chaudhuri), or 'rebrand' them, as suggested by Watson (2022), adopting in their place an alternative term – *midlife* – that acknowledges life-stage membership while rejecting conventional stereotyping. But how advanced is this rebranding process? And can evidence of this be found in the corpus?

3.1.2 Midlife patterns

To answer these questions, the collocational patterns of the expressions *midlife woman* and *midlife man* were extracted, with both the variants *midlife* and *mid-life* being included. To identify collocates, concordances were retrieved for the phrases *mid-life/midlife woman/man*, and collocational patterns extracted. The range set for the search for collocates was 3 words left and right of the node. Rather unexpectedly, the *phrase mid(-)life man* yielded no statistically significant results (logDice<1); the phrase *mid-life woman* (hyphenated) yielded 4 individual occurrences (*perimenopausal*, *c-reactive*, *menopausal* and *menopause)*, but only after the range was extended to include 5 words left and right of the node. As for *midlife woman*, all statistically significant results are shown in Table 3 below:

collocate	Freq	coll. freq.	logDice
nondepressed	3	525	5,92764
allostatic	4	1718	5,54467

multiethnic	14	15759	4,76698
vasomotor	5	5036	4,7412
sleep-related	4	4644	4,51467
perimenopausal	3	3986	4,27549
multi-ethnic	12	28828	3,71624
menopausal	10	33633	3,23832
cardiometabolic	3	10071	3,13878
menopause	34	133100	3,05355
atherosclerosis	6	58298	1,72708
low-dose	3	31032	1,61369
depressive	10	111815	1,53718
carotid	4	46747	1,45416
incontinence	4	80482	0,68421
obstetrics	3	74888	0,37167
cohort	21	607002	0,17839
symptomatic	4	123556	0,07252
insomnia	5	156049	0,06025

Tab. 3: Collocates of 'midlife woman'

As can be seen, the dominant field from which the collocates belong is that of medical discourse, with menopause and other medical issues being the focus of attention.

The investigation was then expanded to the syntactic patterns of use of the phrases *midlife woman* and *midlife man* using the Word Sketch function of SketchEngine. By large the most frequent pattern for *midlife woman* was the prepositional phrase *in midlife women*, of which 194 examples were found. A random sample of concordance lines featuring the expression is reproduced below:

recommendation: preventing obesity *in midlife women*. Public comment is an opportunity for
on autonomic nervous system *in midlife women* with insomnia. Evid Based Complement
and diabetes are highly prevalent *in midlife women* and the prevalence is increasing.
vasomotor symptoms in overweight *in midlife women*: a pilot study. Menopause. 2020 Nov;
and natural killer cell activity *in midlife women* with and without fibromyalgia. Brain,
Benefits and barriers to exercise *in midlife women* undertaking a web-based multi-modal
the heart and cognitive function *in midlife women*, and how it might affect Black women
between migraine and anxiety *in US midlife women*. METHODS: This study was conducted
the post-partum period, depression *in midlife women*, and issues related to infertility and
incident metabolic syndrome *in midlife women*: study of Women's Health Across the

Conc. 1. Random concordance line sample for 'in midlife women'

As can be seen, all concordance lines retrieved point to a prevalence of medical discourse. Extraction of Good Dictionary Examples (which provide syntactically complete sentences deemed to be especially useful to show use-in-context of the lemmas investigated, and can therefore be considered representative of their discoursal use) confirms the impression that health is the main domain in which the phrase *midlife women* features, as shown by examples 1-10 below:

(1) Do anxiety symptoms predict major depressive disorder in *midlife women*?

(2) Type of physical activity goal influences participation in healthy *midlife women*.

(3) Understanding and addressing sleep disruption in *midlife women* is critically important.

(4) Does family history of depression predict major depression in *midlife women*?

(5) Reproductive hormones were associated with sexual function in *midlife women*.

(6) Cognitive aging in *midlife women*: is it real?

(7) Urinary tract infections are more common in *midlife women*.

(8) Eating disorders in *midlife women*: A perimenopausal eating disorder?

(9) Sexual problems are highly prevalent in *midlife women* and often associated with distress.

(10) The natural history of urinary incontinence in *midlife women* is not well described.

Because of the prominence of medical discourse, which may have skewed the results, the query was repeated excluding all texts catalogued under "Health" from the corpus. The new query, however, yielded inconclusive results for what concerns collocates (none was statistically significant); retrieval of Good Dictionary Examples confirmed the medical focus also in non-medical texts, but also enabled the identification – after exclusion of the majority of health-related examples – of a new, emerging discourse of midlife womanhood. The first 10 Good

Dictionary Examples identified by SketchEngine in the EnTenTen21 corpus excluding Health are listed below:

(11) Body-shape motives are associated with decreased physical activity participation *among midlife women*.

(12) Up to 80% *of midlife women* experience hot flashes or night sweats.

(13) Elevated blood pressure is an important public health problem *in midlife women*, especially among minority groups.

(14) Childhood and adult trauma create sleepless nights *for midlife women*. Sleep disturbances are often reported by postmenopausal women.

(15) Access *to midlife women* working in a care-home in south-east England was negotiated through a personal contact.

(16) *Midlife women* are *more* prone to have problems getting pregnant, staying pregnant, and then experiencing difficult deliveries.

(17) Real-life *footage* of Sister Boniface's funeral and burial alternates with the vows *of a midlife woman* entering the convent.

(18) The survey revealed a generation gap in sexual attitudes between *midlife women* those 45 to 59 - and women over 75.

(19) Melissia is the founder of MindSet Nutrition Coaching, LLC, a nutrition and lifestyle company dedicated to helping *midlife women* who "burn the candle at both ends" change their bodies, shift their mindset, boost energy, and build confidence through a sustainable, habit-based, and highly personalized framework.

(20) The *Midlife Woman*; Reinventing Yourself in your Second Adulthood was written for women by a woman who has successfully reinvented herself and her career in midlife.

As can be seen, while health-related issues continue to be present (examples 11-14 and 16), some diversification is detectable. Of the remaining samples, one refers to research focusing on

midlife women working in care homes (15), one mentions a midlife woman entering a convent (17), a third one is also research-related, this time with reference to sexual attitudes (18), and only the last two (19 and 20) offer a glimpse into a rebranding of middle age with which the label *midlife* is claimed to be associated.

These latter two examples offer interesting insights into the discursive positioning of the *midlife* label. In example (19), the founder of MindSet Nutrition Coaching is set to help "midlife women who 'burn the candle at both ends' change their bodies, shift their mindset, boost energy, and build confidence." The defining relative clause "who 'burn the candle at both ends'" restricts the group of ideal beneficiaries to those midlife women only to whom the postmodification applies; most women, however, would identify with this subgroup, which is therefore only apparently limited. As for the characteristics of these midlife women, the wording of the texts makes it possible to infer them: if the offer is to help them change their bodies, the inference is that they are dissatisfied with it; if they need to change their mindset, this is likely negative for their wellbeing. The same can be said for "boost energy" and "build confidence," which invoke the inference that energy in midlife women is low, and confidence scarce. While undoubtedly embodying the typical characteristics of marketing discourse, the excerpt offers a portrayal of midlife women as unhappy about their physical appearance, potentially depressed, and lacking self-confidence. As for example (20), the wording of the title of the book being promoted suggests that while the story told in it is about a single woman, it is also about midlife women as a category, and calls for them to 'reinvent' their lives, thereby suggesting by implication that they are unhappy with their current ones. In both examples, the idea is conveyed that midlife need not be a time of unhappiness and stagnation – but the starting point is that it often is. There's light at the end of the tunnel – but for the time being, women still seem to be very much in the tunnel.

As for *midlife men*, the syntactic patterns revolving around the phrase tell a remarkable different story. Prepositional phrases were the only patterns with a statistically significant number of occurrences, albeit much smaller in number than those found for *midlife woman*. The most striking difference, however, was that patterns involving *midlife* + *man* did not appear in the form "preposition + *midlife man*." Instead, they were invariably in the form "preposition + *man in midlife*." The difference may seem subtle – the function of both premodifiers and postmodifiers is to provide additional information about the noun they refer to; but, as Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, 309) have shown, it is only premodifiers that can have a classifying function, though both can function as membership categorization devices. In the detailed account of noun phrase constituent functions provided in Systemic Functional Grammar, the experiential structure of the nominal group is made up of the following functions: *Deictic*, *Numerative*, *Epithet*, *Classifier*, *Thing* and *Qualifier*, with *Thing* being the head of the Noun

Phrase. In the phrases *midlife woman/man*, 'midlife' can be either a classifier or an epithet. In the case of *midlife woman* considered above, the examples retrieved indicated that *midlife* was indeed used as classifier, with *midlife women* being considered, in the majority of the samples, as a specific class of women. With *man/men in midlife*, the scenario is slightly different. A selection of Good Dictionary Examples, extracted from the only 33 concordance lines retrieved, offers interesting insights into the way in which *midlife men* are framed in discourse:

(21) Andropause is one of the most common health concerns among *men in midlife*.

(22) Isherwood's 1964 novel is a frank and moving examination of a gay *man in midlife*.

(23) Brain structural changes in women and *men in midlife*.

(24) Speaking as a *man in midlife*, I am so glad the Lord does this.

(25) For *men in midlife*, it's a familiar story with a new and controversial name: male menopause.

(26) Here was a *man in midlife*, who'd spent the last 40 years in obscurity, tending to livestock.

(27) They bear names from Dads in Distress to the cuddly sounding Fatherhood Foundation, and typically attract *men in midlife*.

(28) I recall speaking to a *man in midlife* who had criss-crossed North America many times over the course of his life.

(29) That would entail dealing with his mood swings, anxieties, and depression – all very common among *men in their midlife*.

(30) We created the documentary film, Allemansvatten (Everyman's water), to make *men in midlife* consider their genuine swimming ability.

Two things are noticeable here. First, *men in midlife* are handled as a group in only five out of the ten examples retrieved (21, 25, 27, 29, 30). A sixth (23) refers to *men and women in midlife*, but the remaining four (22, 24, 26 and 28) refer to individual men, and are clearly qualifiers,

i.e., while indeed providing an age categorization of the individual(s) they refer to, they do not treat them as specimens in a homogeneous group. Additionally, with the exception of Example 21, none of the excerpts belong to the medical domain. In short, it would appear that, compared to women, midlife men are more often portrayed as individuals, and less as members of a group.

3.1.3 Looser co-occurrences

To complete the overview of gendered *midlife* patterns, the analysis was expanded to include patterns including the lemmas *man/woman* co-occurring with *midlife* within a 5-word-range right or left of the node. Such pattens were of course expected to largely coincide with those identified in the previous part of the analysis, but by broadening the scope of the query it was hypothesized that further insights could be gained. For women, owing to the overwhelming presence of *midlife* in medical texts, the domain of health was excluded from the corpus. After all concordance lines that fulfilled the criteria were retrieved, the resulting corpus selection was searched for collocational patterns other than those for *midlife man/woman*, which had already been investigated. While it was impossible to identify any statistically significant additional patterns, an analysis of the concordance lines and subsequent extraction of Good Dictionary Examples yielded results that not only confirmed what was found with the previous queries, but also showed the persistence of cliches that had not emerged as clearly. For women, menopause continues to dominate discoursal representations, despite the exclusion of strictly medical texts:

(31) Sleep ... or insomnia is not uncommon in *women* starting at *midlife*.

(32) Pollsters said that many *women* at this *midlife* stage still worked full-time.

(33) Pamboukian says that, for *women* in *midlife*, taking action is particularly important.

(34) The concerns *women* feel in *midlife* indicate they are in midlife crisis.

(35) The majority of *women* who reach *midlife* will experience the physical and psychological symptoms of menopause.

(36) We asked NPR listeners what they'd like to know about *women's* health in *midlife*.

(37) For the study, Thurston and her team examined 145 *women* of "*midlife*" age in the US.

(38) In US research carried out in 2018, it was found that 45% of *women* in *midlife* have sexual problems.

(39) Balibar's accurate and daring performance lifts the film from what could have been an average exercise about one *woman's midlife* crisis.

(40) Whether by choice or not, between one and four and one in five British *women* currently reaches *midlife* without having children.

Of all these examples, only (32) is not health-related. All other examples refer to midlife women's physical or mental health concerns, with menopause looming over them. Crisis, which had not featured prominently in association with *midlife women* before, is mentioned once. As for men – well, here crisis is truly prominent, even when it is not mentioned by name. Below are Good Dictionary Examples (again, selected for the sake of syntactic completeness and discursive representativeness) drawn from the corpus. Notice that the word *midlife* may not feature in the sentence suggested by the software (as in Example 41), though the sentence itself is taken from a context in which *midlife* occurs within 5 words from the node *man/men*.

(41) Both *men* and women must naturally pass through this stage.

(42) *Men* have *midlife* crisis at almost any age.

(43) Bone loss begins or accelerates at *midlife* for both men and women.

(44) Both *men's midlife* trauma consisted of WWII suffered Naples' style.

(45) I've heard of *midlife men* dumping their families and buying sportscars.

(46) *Men* undergoing a *midlife* crisis are especially vulnerable to this sort of behavior.

(47) I sat across the lunch table today from a *man* in *midlife* misery.

(48) I know a *man* who in *midlife* experienced a near-fatal coronary.

(49) For a guy that's going through *midlife*, *man* that's hell!

(50) A portion of a *man's midlife* crisis is his aging wife's declining sex appeal.

As these examples show, far from ushering in a world of opportunities, midlife is still very much represented as a time of crisis, failing health, and general misery, to adopt a word that aptly occurs in one of the examples. Evidence of midlife as a time of opportunity is hardly anywhere to be found. It may be an emerging discourse – but for the time being, it is still very much a minority one.

4. Discussion

This study has examined the gendered use of membership categorizations referring to the middle years of the lifecourse in contemporary English discourse, drawing on data from the EnTenTen21 corpus. The inquiry was motivated by the increasing presence, across public-facing and academic arenas, of debates suggesting that middle age may be undergoing conceptual redefinition. In particular, recent editorials have hinted at the emergence of a more positively framed 'new middle age,' often presented as closely associated with the term *midlife* and implicitly contrasted with *middle-aged*, which continues to carry negative evaluative overtones. These debates suggested that a process of dissociation (in the sense introduced by Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca [1969]) might be underway: the traditional conceptual unity of "middle age" could be splitting into two distinct notions – a chronologically anchored *midlife* and a stereotype-laden *middle-aged*. Dissociation offers a way to reconcile conceptual tensions by separating elements previously treated as inseparable. As van Rees, citing Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), explains:

> In dissociation […] a unity that up till then was considered to be an indissoluble whole is broken: a single notion, that was considered a conceptual unity and that is referred to by a single term, is split up into two new notions, which are referred to by two different terms. Dissociation, therefore, always entails a more or less fundamental restructuring of our conception of reality. (Van Rees 2009, 4)

This interpretive lens is particularly apt for the phenomenon examined here, as editorial discourse appears to treat *middle age* as conceptually overloaded – chronologically accurate, but evaluatively problematic – prompting the rhetorical adoption of *midlife* as its more desirable correlate.

However, the corpus findings suggest that such redefinition is still in its early stages, as virtually no corpus evidence was found to support the hypothesis of its establishment. Instead, the analysis confirmed the persistence of negative stereotypes in the characterization of middle-aged individuals. Collocational patterns associated with *middle-aged woman* and *middle-aged*

man continue to foreground familiar markers of decline (weight gain, greying hair, glasses), with women additionally marked by frumpiness and loss of attractiveness, and men by baldness and corpulence. These attributes function as "secondary age markers" (Moon 2014), encoding negative semantic prosodies and offering little evidence of conceptual reconstruction.

If dissociation were fully taking root in broader discourse, it may be expected that *midlife* should display a distinct cluster of more positive or at least neutral associations. This, however, does not appear to be the case: the expression *midlife woman/women* remains predominantly embedded in medical discourse, even outside explicitly medical domains, with menopause and health issues overwhelmingly dominating the semantic environment. The predominance of the plural form, with *midlife* typically used in classificatory function, further reinforces the impression of women being treated as a homogeneous category defined by biology – something that was implied in earlier research, but which corpus analysis demonstrates more clearly.

For men, the picture differs. *Midlife man/men* do not yield statistically significant collocates, and *man in midlife* appears far more frequently than *midlife men*, suggesting a predominantly qualifying rather than classifying role. Thus, men appear to be discursively less homogenised, though when *midlife* co-occurs with *man*, crisis- and distress-related frames still surface. Yet even these do not form a stable, medicalised category comparable to that observed for women. Again, while this may have been already implied in previous studies, corpus data yield weight to the claim.

These findings corroborate the hypothesis that the rise of *midlife* as a positive alternative to *middle-aged* signalled in recent (post-2022) editorials is truly an emerging phenomenon, with hardly any detectable antecedents. By contrast, the stereotypes it seeks to dispel are very much present, and visibly entrenched in pre-2021 discourse. Whether this ongoing attempt at rebranding will ultimately succeed – and whether it will translate into tangible shifts in ageist attitudes – remains an open question, one that only longitudinal developments in public discourse and cultural uptake will be able to clarify.

5. Conclusions

This study has shown that contemporary English discourse up until 2021 continued to reproduce a narrow and predominantly negative repertoire for describing the middle years of the lifecourse. Despite occasional attempts to reframe this stage in more positive terms, the lexical and collocational patterns that circulate most widely remain anchored in familiar stereotypes of physical decline and loss of desirability. Such patterns constrain the interpretive space within which individuals can understand – and be understood – as middle-aged.

The selective revalorisation of midlife observable in some post-2022 public-facing texts can be interpreted as a dissociative manoeuvre that separates the traditional notion of middle age into an older, stigmatised version and a newly aspirational one. This reframing, however, does not seem – at the moment at least – to truly escape ageism: in fact, in so far as it identifies only certain trajectories, lifestyles, or bodily presentations as 'acceptable' or 'modern' forms of midlife, it risks simply replacing obsolete chrononormative expectations with new, equally constraining ones (will we all be able to not visibly age in midlife?) and reinforcing negative judgements toward those who do not conform. In this sense, even progressive rearticulations of the life stage risk reproducing the very exclusions they seek to challenge.

What is needed instead is a broader and more diversified lexicon for describing middle age. Such lexicon should neither be organised exclusively around deficit or decline, nor around narrow ideals of achievement, productivity, or physical maintenance posited as exceptional, or age-defying. Expanding the available descriptive resources would allow for a wider range of identifications and experiences to be recognised as legitimate, thereby enabling individuals to inhabit midlife without the interpretive constraints imposed by entrenched stereotypes.

Ultimately, the findings underscore that linguistic change is essential for cultural change: the reframing of middle age beyond academic arguments will require not just new terminology, but a recalibration of the evaluative frameworks that give age-related labels their social force. Only then can middle age be represented – and experienced – as the diversely articulated life stage it already is rather than a category bounded by inherited scripts.

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Bionote

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(2023), "Evolving Discursive Constructions of Aging in Social Gerontology Textbooks" (2022) and "Unpacking Recovery Talk: Applied Linguistics and Anorexia Recovery Narratives" (2025).

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