

her voice in photos

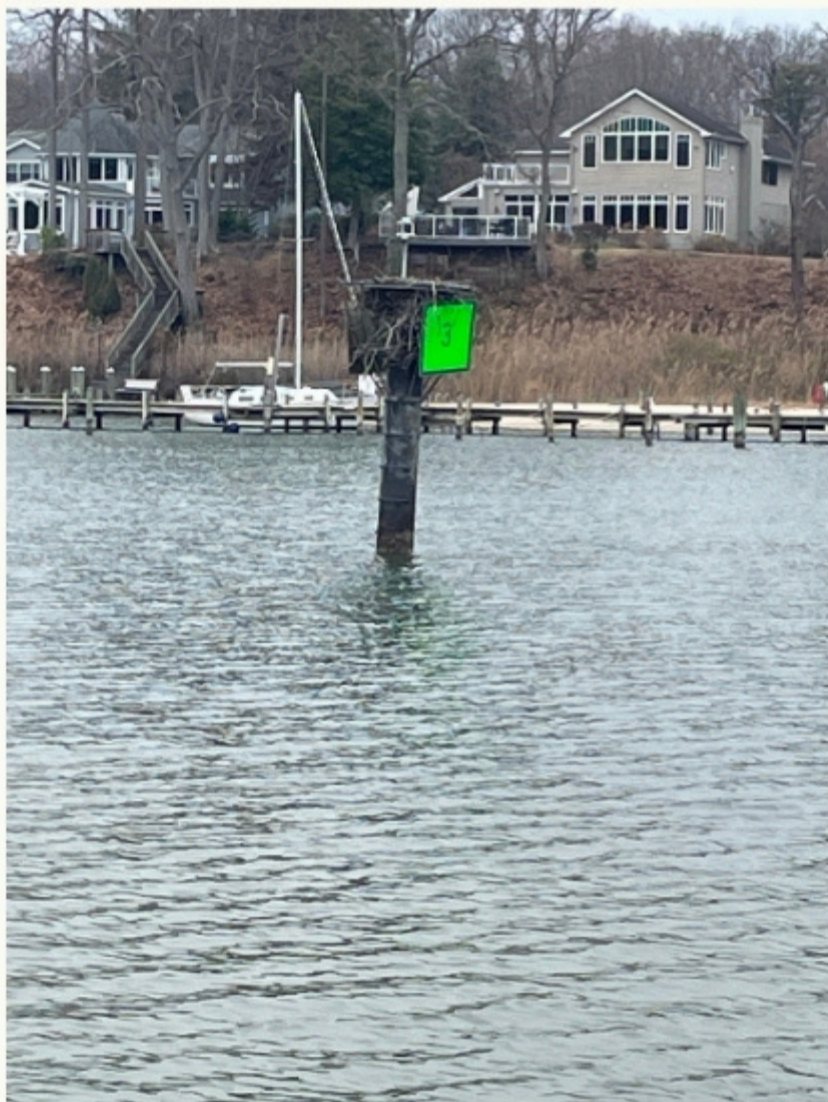
Empowering Women Through the Lens of Resilience

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MS in Art Therapy | Syracuse University | April 2026

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The osprey nest feels like my future--empty at the moment, but waiting for life to return. Will the osprey be back? Only time will tell.

MARY, 55

Today's Presentation

01

The Problem

Midlife women face converging stressors with few accessible supports

02

The Gap

No model combined private digital reflection with community witnessing

03

The Program

Her Voice in Photos — design, structure, and theoretical grounding

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Research Questions

Three questions guiding design, procedure, and analysis

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Methodology

Arts-based participatory qualitative design, two phases

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Results

Seven core themes, five pattern codes, 76 codes across three sources

07

Discussion

What the findings mean — and what surprised me

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Implications

For art therapists, the field, and future research

Midlife Women: A Convergence of Stressors

Biological Shifts

Hormonal transitions including perimenopause and menopause amplify anxiety, depression, and stress, peaking during the transition itself.

(Kuck & Hogervorst, 2024)

Caregiving & Identity

Many women simultaneously manage aging parents and dependent children while navigating profound role shifts and personal identity redefinition.

(Thomas et al., 2018; Colvin et al., 2014)

Cultural Invisibility

78% of adults 40+ have witnessed or experienced age discrimination. Women face the compounded burden of gendered ageism in workplaces and culture.

(Perron, 2021)

Despite clear evidence linking these stressors to poorer well-being, community-based preventive interventions remain scarce.

What Was Missing in the Literature

Gaps

- No integrated model combining private digital reflection with community-based display
- Existing approaches required group facilitation, formal diagnosis, or professional oversight
- Little research focused on midlife women or non-clinical participatory digital storytelling
- Most programs were one-time interventions, not replicable frameworks
- Deficit-focused: research emphasized symptoms over resilience and strength

The Opportunity

A model that is...

- Private yet visible
- Self-directed yet structured
- Reflective while community-centered
- Trauma-informed, non-clinical, scalable
- Designed for midlife women

her voice in photos

Empowering Women Through the Lens of Resilience

A participatory therapeutic photography model connecting private digital reflection with community witnessing — designed for women in midlife, outside of clinical settings.

Participatory

Women are co-creators, not subjects

Art Therapy-Informed

Rooted in core AT principles

Strengths-Based

Resilience, not deficits

Community-Based

Private reflection, public witnessing

Trauma-Informed

Safety, choice, tiered consent

Theoretical Foundations

Emotional Regulation & Cognitive Reappraisal

Gross (2002); Clark (2022)

Reinterpreting the meaning of an experience to shift its emotional impact and basis of the challenge/reframe/reflect arc

Narrative Identity

McAdams & McLean (2013)

The internalized, evolving story of the self; coherence develops through organizing experiences into sequential narratives

Empowerment & Trauma-Informed Practice

Herman (2022); Badenoch (2018)

Safety, choice, transparency, and agency; healing occurs where individuals feel seen, heard, and valued

Witnessing & Transitional Space

Winnicott (1971); Arrigoni & Galani (2021)

Images as bridges between inner experience and shared reality; community viewing affirms lived experience

Art Therapy Principles & Public Pedagogy

Kapitan (2017); Sandlin et al. (2011)

The multiplier effect of artmaking across personal, relational, and cultural domains; learning in everyday spaces

Identity & Social Identity Theory

Stets & Burke (2000); Hornsey (2008)

Both personal reflection and community witnessing are needed — internal coherence and social validation reinforce each other

Three Guiding Questions

RQ1**Participant Experience**

How did midlife women experience reflective photography and captioning as a process that fostered emotional insight, narrative coherence, resilience-building, and well-being, including joy?

RQ2**Witness Experience**

How did witnesses experience the digital frame installation, and how did viewing the images affect their perceptions of midlife women and their own sense of connection and well-being?

RQ3**Feasibility & Accessibility**

What aspects of Her Voice in Photos support feasibility, accessibility, and acceptability as a trauma-informed, non-clinical model?

Project Design

Qualitative Program Evaluation Using Thematic Analysis, Two Phases

Phase 1: Photography

- 6 women recruited (5 completed), ages 40–65
- Week-long photography sequence
- Challenge / Reframe / Reflect arc
- Self-selected images submitted via JotForm
- Written captions + reflections
- Focus group (FG1) + individual interview (P1)



Phase 2: Witnessing

- 3 witnesses (women 40–65, not participants)
- Digital frame installation at HudCo Coworking
- 3 curated images per participant displayed
- Personal reflections alongside images
- In-person witness focus group (WG1)

Data Collection & Analysis

FG1

Participant Focus Group

*4 of 5 participants
via Zoom*

P1

Individual Interview

*1 participant
via Zoom*

WG1

Witness Focus Group

*3 witnesses
in-person at HudCo*

Analysis: Braun & Clarke (2022) Thematic Analysis + Saldaña (2013) Coding Manual

- Multiple readings for familiarization with the data
- First-cycle coding: In Vivo, Process, and Descriptive coding — 76 total codes
- Second-cycle: Pattern coding identified 5 program-level patterns
- Reflexive journaling + member checking and advisor consultation to monitor bias and support credibility

Results at a Glance

76

Total Codes

7

Core Themes

5

Pattern Codes

800+

Women Signed Up

Seven Core Themes

1 Photography as Therapeutic Process

2 Brief Reflection & Captioning

3 Reframing & Resilience

4 Emotional Processing & Regulation

5 Community Witnessing & Connection

6 Accessibility & Engagement

7 Midlife Women's Identity

Photography as Therapeutic Process

Most heavily coded theme — appeared across both participant and witness data

"Taking the pictures was kind of meditative. It's funny because I kind of approached it like I was an artist. And I thought, I can do this."

"When you asked for a picture, that really made me think about it differently. It came from a different place than words."

Photography provided psychological distance — participants did not narrate pain verbally first. The image allowed indirect, non-linear entry into difficult experience. (Gibson, 2024)



"Oontz Oontz: A baby rave"

She makes the oontz oontz of the dance beat like she's at the club when she's in the tub, with glow sticks and baby bubbles. Her foam letters float on the surface as she grabs for her letter, the one that starts her name, the first letter of the alphabet.

I can make art from this moment. From so many of these moments. I think my creativity is not dead, maybe not even dormant. I just need to look through a different lens (literally as well as figuratively). I won't always have time to set up my camera, but I can use my phone in the moment.

Brief Reflection & Captioning

The only theme unique to participants — structurally, witnesses did not caption.

Participants consistently identified captioning — not photography — as the most therapeutically potent element.

"Having to explain why I had this visceral reaction in just a few words — that was surprisingly challenging."

"I was surprised that I didn't feel that old anger well up, that resentment. It was just not as... it's dying down."

Implication: The image alone is not enough. It is the pairing of image with brief written reflection that deepens the therapeutic process.

Reframing & Resilience

For Participants

"It doesn't have to be so dramatic. I can still have a life."

For Witnesses

"I hope that I can approach it in a different way."

Reframing was experiential for participants, something that happened through the process. For witnesses, it was anticipatory, a future orientation the images inspired.

Participants did not arrive at tidy resolutions. They arrived at something more honest: a shift in how difficulty is held. The challenge/reframe/reflect arc aligned with cognitive reappraisal (Gross, 2002).

"I can see the light through the trees. I've always seen the light through the trees, but now I can share that perspective."



A portrait I painted. I had never painted a portrait before this process, and I particularly like the detail of her eye. While I was working on this, my daughter mentioned to a friend that I was in my "flow state," which was a meaningful moment for me.

CARRIE, 48

Emotional Processing & Regulation

Umbrella theme with 3 sub-themes — most structurally complex finding

Grief & Loss

The most surprising finding. Participants surfaced the end of marriages, death of parents, illness, and loss of identity, far deeper than the prompts anticipated.

Vulnerability & Authenticity

Participants navigated real tension around self-disclosure, carefully choosing what to share, finding that the act of choosing was itself therapeutic.

Joy, Gratitude & Presence

Only 3 codes — all from witnesses. Participants did not describe joy. They described meaning, difficulty, clarity, and hope. (See next slide.)



The chunks of aqua colored slag glass now reside in my landscape. The story I tell includes me beside my mom in the factory field gathering the scrap glass pieces that day when the company allowed the public to pick for free. In reality, I wasn't invited to share the experience. Every visit to my mother's home I admired the "rocks" of glass in her yard. One year she gave me one and I was thrilled to have a piece of something she loved. After she passed, I told her friends who were cleaning out her house the fictional memory to justify my hauling the heavy chunks of slag to my car. Back to my home. Jagged, prismatic, discarded, but glorious glass.

A perfect representation of our relationship.

A Key Finding:

Joy vs. Hope

Joy implies arrival.

Participants were still inside their experiences. They had not arrived anywhere. Joy was not yet available to them — and it was not the goal of the model.

Hope implies orientation.

Hope suggests someone is still in the difficulty but can see something ahead. That is what participants described. The program succeeded in meaning-making and reframing — just as designed.

Witnesses viewed from a distance — free to experience gratitude and joy because they carried none of the original weight. (Gross, 2002; Clark, 2022 — reappraisal theory)



Community Witnessing & Connection

"I thought it was really interesting how quickly I was moved by someone I've never met."

— Witness (WGI)

- Witnesses described viewing as emotionally activating, relational, and at times overwhelming
- Dialogic witnessing (Arrigoni & Galani, 2021): viewers bring their own experiences into the encounter
- One unexpected finding: the witnessing portion felt less impactful than the participant experience
- Practical barriers: co-working environment was not designed for quiet, focused emotional engagement

Future research should explore intentional gallery or exhibition settings to maximize the impact of the witnessing component.

Accessibility & Midlife Women's Identity

Theme 6: Accessibility & Engagement

- All participants used personal smartphones — no special equipment or skill required
- Practical barriers: JotForm mobile upload difficulties; unexpected reflection prompt at the end
- Over 800 women signed up via social media with no compensation offered

Theme 7: Midlife Women's Identity

- Appeared in both participant and witness data with nearly equal distribution — a shared concern across both groups
- Participants described identity as unfamiliar territory: navigating the transition between who they were and who they are becoming
- Witnesses recognized the liminal state in the images and connected it to their own experience
- Aligns with Stets & Burke (2000): when transitions disrupt internalized roles, people rely on processes that restore coherence

Confirming Program Design

Second-cycle pattern coding identified how the program operated — not what participants experienced, but how the model functioned.

Participatory

Participants were active co-creators — photographing, captioning, selecting, and deciding their own levels of visibility

Art Therapy-Informed

Photography accessed suppressed material, externalized internal states, and enabled emotional softening without clinical oversight (Kapitan, 2017)

Strengths-Based

Participants drew on innate creative capacity, personal resilience, and the challenge/reframe arc to move toward meaning

Community-Based

The witnessing structure extended the program's reach into a shared social space, activating connection across strangers

Trauma-Informed

Tiered consent, participant agency, no required exposure — safety and choice embedded in every element (Herman, 2022)

What Surprised Me

The Depth of Grief

The prompts were designed around challenge and resilience, not loss. Yet grief became a dominant thread — participants surfaced the end of marriages, loss of parents, and unfinished grief.

The Difficulty of the Process

Participants described the work as hard. Captioning was 'surprisingly challenging'. Organizing grief into beginning, middle, and end was 'the difficult part'

800 Women

Over 800 women signed up for a thesis study with no compensation offered. I was surprised and not surprised. Women in midlife are looking for exactly this.

Joy Was Absent

Participants did not describe the experience as joyful. They described it as meaningful, difficult, clarifying, and hopeful. This became one of the most important theoretical insights.

Practical Implications for Art Therapists

- Photography and brief captioning can function as an art therapy-informed intervention without clinical supervision, specialized materials, or artistic training
- The image-caption pairing is more therapeutically potent than either element alone — structure reflective activities around this combination
- Tiered consent and participant agency offer a replicable framework for trauma-informed community-based practice: domestic violence programs, oncology settings, and more
- Community witnessing can extend AT-informed work beyond individual clients into public spaces, realizing Kapitan's (2017) multiplier effect
- The self-guided design bridges independent reflection and clinical therapy, participant work can be brought directly into existing therapeutic relationships
- The most scalable version is a purpose-built platform where facilitators can access templates, manage submissions, and run the program without technical expertise.

Scalability & Systemic Impact

800+

Women signed up for a
thesis study with
no compensation offered.

The need is real.

- Kapitan's (2017) multiplier effect: the digital frame at HudCo transformed private reflections into community-level engagement
- Unlike most participatory photography models, this is designed as a replicable program — not a one-time research project
- Smartphone-based, asynchronous, self-directed: low barrier to entry, broad potential reach
- The model's framing — private, non-clinical, strengths-based — resonated at scale before a single participant was selected

Directions for Future Research

Larger, Diverse Sample

Expand beyond self-selected, social media-recruited participants to strengthen transferability across backgrounds and experiences

Witnessing Conditions

Study the impact of intentional gallery or exhibition settings better designed for quiet, focused emotional engagement

Longitudinal Follow-Up

Resilience and reframing deepen over time; follow-up interviews 3–6 months out would illuminate longer-term effects

Isolate the Captioning

Compare photography alone vs. photography with captioning to better understand the contribution of the brief reflection component

Tailored Prompts

Test prompts organized around specific categories — caregiving, loss, identity — to determine whether focus increases therapeutic specificity

Scalability Testing

Pilot the program with larger cohorts, different populations, and varied prompts to test whether the core structure holds

Study Limitations

- Small pilot sample (n=5 participants, n=3 witnesses): transferability is limited.
- Self-selected, predominantly social media-recruited sample, may over-represent motivated, tech-comfortable individuals
- Dual role as researcher and facilitator introduced potential bias mitigated through reflexive journaling and advisor consultation
- Uneven data collection: group focus group dynamics may have shaped FG1 differently than the individual P1 interview
- One-week photography sequence, longer engagement or delayed follow-up could reveal deeper resilience shifts
- All witnesses were women in midlife; non-midlife witnesses might have experienced the installation differently, with broader community implications

These limitations are consistent with a pilot study and point directly to the priorities for future research.

Conclusion

Her Voice in Photos began with a question: Could a participatory photography practice function as an art therapy-informed, strengths-based intervention for women in midlife?

The findings suggest that it can.

Strengths-based does not mean easy or joyful. Participants engaged with difficult material. They surfaced grief they had not fully processed. They navigated vulnerability and made deliberate choices about disclosure. The process produced not joy but something closer to what the literature calls hope, an orientation toward what is possible, even from inside the difficulty.

The 800 women who signed up suggest the need is real. The five who participated suggest the model works. They took photographs of light coming through windows, of grief that had not ended, of lives still unresolved — and found, in some cases, that something in the process had shifted.



Reflection allows us to make sense of things in the past, sometimes to learn from or find (or perhaps create) meaning in what has happened. Some things just don't make sense. If I look hard enough, I can usually find the sun peeking through the clouds.

COURTNEY, 47

Thank You

I would like to thank Dr. Nolan, my committee, my cohort, and the five women who gave their time, their stories, and their trust to this project.

This is for the woman in midlife who has been overlooked, underestimated, or made to feel that her most interesting chapters are behind her.

You are not invisible. You are not done.

Questions & Discussion

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