



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2024:
The 25th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Sheffield, UK / 30 Oct - 2 Nov 2024

FATHERHOOD ON DATING APPS: A NORWEGIAN TWIST

Plata S. Diesen
Kristiania University College

Introduction

Research on dating app usage is expanding, with a growing consensus that these platforms have largely replaced the traditional matchmaking roles of family and friends (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022; Pettersen & Karlsen, 2023; Wu & Trottier, 2022). Scholars suggest that disrupted love is increasingly a characteristic of romantic relationships in contemporary Western societies (Bauman, 2013; Illouz, 2019), and I posit that mid-life single parents exemplify this social shift. Yet, this substantial minority has received little to no research attention. The heterosexual male perspective has also been disproportionately understudied, even though popular apps like Tinder have a predominantly male user base (BusinessOfApps, 2023). Furthermore, while existing studies largely focus on young adults (Dwyer et al., 2021; Konings et al., 2022), older age groups are increasingly engaging with apps like Tinder (BusinessOfApps, 2023).

In this paper, I aim to address the following question: *How do single dads in mid-life present themselves as parents on dating apps in Norway?* My aim is to contribute to two key areas within the academic discourse. First, I focus on impression management in dating app research, drawing on Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory to examine how individuals manage the impressions they convey by adapting their behaviors and appearances. This analysis builds upon existing studies that show how dating app users aim to present an ideal yet authentic self (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2021; Ward, 2019). However, to understand these idealized self-presentations, it requires an awareness of the relevant cultural context, leading to the second key area.

Culture, often defined as "the beliefs, behaviors, customs, and values that characterize a particular social group" (Lansford, 2022, p. 467), is dynamic and evolves over time. While parenting practices share similarities across cultures, variations emerge from differences in physical environments and social expectations (Lansford, 2022). In Norway, single parenthood is common, with approximately 30%

Suggested Citation (APA): Diesen, P.S. (2024, October). *Fatherhood on Dating Apps – a Norwegian Twist*. Paper presented at AoIR2024: The 25th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Sheffield, UK: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

of children experiencing parental separation before age 17 (Statistics Norway, 2023). In alignment with neighboring Sweden, fathers are actively encouraged to pursue equal involvement in child care responsibilities on a structural and political level (Graf & Wojnicka, 2023), with 50/50 shared custody being widely supported as the ideal after parental separation. Nevertheless, equally shared custody remains correlated with good economy, higher education, employment, good health, and low level of conflict (Statistics Norway, 2022). When assessing single fathers' parental presentations on dating apps, it is essential to consider this context.

Methods

To investigate the research question, I adopted a multimethodological approach, involving interviews, dating profile analysis, netnography, and ethnography. The Norwegian ethical board (SIKT) approved the project in June 2023, emphasizing the need to safe-guard the non-consenting third parties, such as children and ex-partners—a crucial reminder given the study's sensitive nature. This approach not only provides insights into single fathers who use dating apps, but also the complexities of conducting research in this domain.

Twelve single fathers aged 39–52, who were using or had recently used dating apps, participated in semi-structured interviews. Geographically, three lived in Oslo, five in smaller cities, and four in rural areas across Norway. Custody arrangements varied, as two fathers had full custody, six had 50% custody, three had 30% custody, and one had flexible arrangements.

Through netnographic research methods (Kozinets, 2020), I examined presentations and interactions related to dating and parenthood on Tinder and Happn over seven months in 2023. Being a single mother and dating app user myself, I found a unique access point to investigate this demographic. I used my personal profile, supplemented with academic and project credentials when I observed, interacted, and chatted with single fathers. I informed about the project in an early chat stage. The netnographic study intertwined with offline ethnography, as I met with some of the men on dates, although most dates evolved into interview-like encounters rather than romantic dates, with men eager to share their perspectives. The men had diverse backgrounds and were generally well-educated.

Additionally, I analyzed dating app self-presentations from 100 men who mentioned having children. Using a reset profile with minimal preferences (age 35–55), the sample had a mean age of 46. Geographically, 37 participants lived in Oslo, 23 in smaller cities, and 40 in rural areas, excluding the northernmost parts of Norway. Educational backgrounds ranged from below high school to PhD. Some profiles included images of children, but due to ethical considerations, pictures were excluded from analysis. Instead, I focused on textual (bios) and hypertextual (tags) elements, an unconventional yet valuable approach for dating app self-presentation research.

Preliminary results

In the interviews, the men emphasized the significance of disclosing their roles as fathers on their dating profiles, and findings from the netnography and ethnography support this. The disclosure served multiple purposes: it declared their identity as

fathers, highlighted their life priorities, and simplified the logistic demands of single parenthood. It was also perceived to “look good” when they were searching for women in similar situations. Information about their children was aimed to find compatibility, ideally seeking someone with children of similar ages, recognizing it as a particular life stage. Equal custody (50/50) was considered a promise of stability, accountability, trustworthiness, and low conflict with the co-parent. Those with less than 50% custody chose not to disclose this information in their profiles, perceiving it as an undesirable trait. Some expressed feelings of shame due to their lesser parenting time. Specifying odd- or even numbered weeks was a logistical necessity, because dating offline was an activity reserved for when their children were with the other parent. The use of hypertextual tags were considered highly important, shaping both self-presentation and partner selection. For some men, mismatching tags outweighed appealing photos, especially for those uninterested in having more children.

On dating app profiles, men disclosed details about their fatherhood in various ways, often making it their focal point beside name, age, and profession. In their bios, written texts could include number and ages of their children, and information about custody arrangements, such as odd or even numbered week schedules and/or a 50/50 custody share. They could also use emojis, primarily 👨👦, 👨👧, 👨👦👧, 👨👦👧, 👨👦, or 👨👧, 👧, ❤️, 🧑 (number of emojis matching number of boys or girls), occasionally followed by “50%” (i.e., equal custody share). Some also indicated that they did not desire more children with a ✂️, meaning vasectomy. Alternatively, pre-made tags provided by the apps, such as “I have children and want more”, “I have children and don’t want more”, and other variations, were used to disclose their aspirations for the future. Those elaborating further primarily did so in two discursive categories: activity-focused, highlighting their enjoyment of active leisure with their children, or priority-driven, announcing their dedication, commonly stating they were “100 % dads 50 % of the time”.

Conclusion

Mid-life single dads on dating apps in Norway highlighted fatherhood prominently on their profiles. They shared custody details, parenting schedules, and aspirations by using emojis, text, and tags. Their self-disclosure emphasized identity, priorities, and compatibility, seeking partners in similar life stages, with logistical alignment shaping partner selection. Such disclosures reflect the interplay between cultural expectations of parenting, personal identity, practical constraints, and strategic self-presentation in digital dating contexts.

References

- Bandinelli, C., & Gandini, A. (2022). Dating apps: The uncertainty of marketised love. *Cultural Sociology*, 16(3), 423-441.
- Bauman, Z. (2013). *Liquid love: On the frailty of human bonds*. John Wiley & Sons.
- BusinessOfApps. (2023). *Tinder Revenue and Usage Statistics (2023)*. Soko Media. Retrieved 10.12. from <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tinder-statistics/>
- Degen, J. L., & Kleeberg-Niepage, A. (2021). Profiling the self in mobile online dating apps: A serial picture analysis. *Human Arenas*, 1-25.

- Dwyer, Z., Hookway, N., & Robards, B. (2021). Navigating 'thin' dating markets: Mid-life repartnering in the era of dating apps and websites. *Journal of Sociology*, 57(3), 647-663.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor Books edition. Garden City, N.Y. : Doubleday, 1959.
<https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999467804702121>
- Graf, T. E., & Wojnicka, K. (2023). Post-separation fatherhood narratives in Germany and Sweden: between caring and protective masculinities. *Journal of Family Studies*, 29(3), 1022-1042. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2021.2020148>
- Illouz, E. (2019). *The end of love: A sociology of negative relations*. Oxford University Press.
- Konings, F., Sumter, S. R., Vranken, I., Dredge, R., & Vandebosch, L. (2022). Behind the Screens: A Systematic Literature Review of Quantitative Research on Mobile Dating. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 51(6), 2969-3020.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-022-02312-9>
- Kozinets, R. (2020). *Netnography - The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Lansford, J. E. (2022). Annual research review: Cross-cultural similarities and differences in parenting. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 63(4), 466-479.
- Pettersen, L., & Karlsen, F. (2023). Strategic communication in digital ecosystems: A critical. *Strategic Communication—Contemporary Perspectives*, 6115.
- Statistics Norway. (2022). *Delt bosted for barn etter samlivsbrudd. Nye utviklingstrekk og kjennetegn. (Shared Custody for Children after Divorce. New Developmental features)*. Retrieved May from
<https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/barn-familier-og-husholdninger/artikler/delt-bosted-for-barn-etter-samlivsbrudd.nye-utviklingstrekk-og-kjennetegn>
- Statistics Norway. (2023). *Familier og husholdninger (Families and households)*.
<https://www.ssb.no/statbank/table/06204>
- Ward, J. (2019). Dating App Autoethnography: Presenting Myself as a Researcher and User. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(1), 130-144.
- Wu, S., & Trottier, D. (2022). Dating apps: a literature review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 46(2), 91-115.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2022.2069046>