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FROM RUPTURED RELATIONSHIPS TO SWIPING RIGHT – SINGLE PARENTS ON DATING APPS

Plata S. Diesen
Kristiania University of Applied Sciences

Introduction

The dissolution of a family unit represents a profound rupture – especially for the individuals involved but also in the broader structures of intimacy and emotional security. Dating apps, often characterized by immediacy, superficiality, and game-like mechanics (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2022), are increasingly becoming the primary avenue through which single parents re-enter the search for love and intimacy. This study draws on 22 interviews with mid-life single parents in Norway and aims to illuminate how they navigate digital dating while balancing their everyday lives with parental responsibilities. For many of them, engaging with online dating platforms marks their first exposure to digitally mediated romance. As the study shows, their entry into this space is typically accompanied by both entertainment and disorientation, as they navigate the logistical complexities of balancing dating with familial responsibilities. Unlike younger users or those without dependents, single parents must manage a multi-layered set of considerations, including personal aspirations, co-parenting arrangements, childcare responsibilities, and the long-term implications of introducing a new partner into their children's lives.

Single Parents and the Fluid Realities of Digital Dating

With his concept of *liquid love*, Bauman (2003) elucidated the instability and transience of modern relationships, which he termed *fluid relationships* in contrast to the *solid* and enduring nature of traditional marriage. As stable familial structures erode under the pressures of modernity, I argue that mid-life single parents emerge as exemplars of this transformation. Thrust into a digital dating ecosystem, they experience relationships as Bauman describes – characterized by accessibility yet disposability, intimacy yet detachment. This fluidity breeds ambivalence: dating apps provide unprecedented access to potential partners but also expose users to the commodification of intimacy (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022), the ephemerality of digital interactions, and the frequent mismatch between long-term relational aspirations and the fast-paced, appearance-driven mechanics of these platforms (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2022). The ruptures that arise in this ambivalence reflect both desire and resistance, as users

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are torn between genuine connection and the transient, superficial nature of online encounters.

Illouz's *The End of Love* (2019) further situates this shift within a broader landscape of affective labor and emotional inequalities, where the pursuit of love is shaped by market logic and algorithmic selection. While dating apps ostensibly democratize access to romance, they also subject users to new forms of rejection, expectation misalignment, and the paradox of choice – key hallmarks of *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2000).

Managing this relational instability early in life is one thing; adapting to it later is another. Yet, for single parents, dating apps remain an essential means of re-engaging with romance, offering a pathway that compensates for their constrained social opportunities and time-consuming responsibilities (Dwyer et al., 2021; Stoicescu & Rughiniș, 2022).

Methodology

In this study, I employed a qualitative research design, conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 single mothers and 12 single fathers aged 32–52 from various regions of Norway. Participants were recruited based on their current or recent use of dating applications. The transcribed interviews were uploaded to NVivo software and systematically coded using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2003). This facilitated a thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of key patterns and themes across the dataset. Thematic analysis was conducted iteratively, ensuring that new insights remained grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Ethical considerations were central to the study's design and implementation. The research received approval in June 2023 from SIKT – the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research – with particular emphasis on protecting non-consenting third parties, including children and former partners. To uphold this ethical commitment, participants were guided away from discussing identifiable third parties where possible. Additionally, anonymization measures were implemented in the transcription process to ensure confidentiality. These measures mitigated potential ethical concerns while preserving the integrity of the data.

The Emotional Complexities of Digital Dating for Single Parents

Dating as a single parent in the digital age involves balancing the desire for companionship with the demands of family life. Most interviewees sought long-term relationships, but dating apps, while efficient and offering expanded choices, often prioritize instant attraction over deeper compatibility (Parisi & Comunello, 2020). Combined with past experiences of unfulfilled love, this led to reluctance about their long-term goals, questioning whether the "happily-ever-after" was realistically attainable. The clash between fast-paced, image-driven interactions and a more deliberate, future-oriented approach created significant cognitive and emotional labor. The emotional journey of these single parents reflected resilience, adaptability, and a redefinition of personal expectations.

While some embraced dating apps with excitement, others were more skeptical, shaped by past heartbreaks and parental instincts. Men often described their first experiences

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as "a kid in a candy store," while women felt overwhelmed. Both genders initially swiped thoughtfully, aware of the person behind each profile and feeling sympathy for those they rejected. Over time, they refined their approach, learning to filter potential partners more effectively and set clearer boundaries that aligned with their priorities.

Experiences of fatigue from cycles of brief conversations, unmet expectations, and superficial exchanges misaligned with long-term goals were common. Still, they recognized that dating apps played a crucial role in reshaping their romantic possibilities. Without them, many would struggle to find partners due to the isolating nature of single parenthood. Despite their flaws, these platforms break social barriers, allowing users to seek connection on their own terms and timelines – offering new beginnings after ruptured love.

Preferences and Compatibility Considerations

The need for understanding in their unique situation was frequently emphasized by the interviewees, who sought partners with similar life circumstances and often preferred to date other single parents. They believed that those without children would never fully grasp the profound implications of ruptured families or the ongoing necessity to prioritize children and cooperate with a co-parent while forming a new relationship. As a result, they felt shared parental experiences would foster compatibility and ease the integration of blended family structures. Many also preferred partners with children of similar ages, believing this commonality would promote understanding and reduce future relational challenges. Proximity was another important factor, as logistical considerations – such as co-parenting schedules and daily routines – made it more practical to form connections within a manageable geographic range, which made geolocation features on dating apps a crucial element. These preferences further shaped their digital dating experiences, narrowing their pool of potential matches while hoping to increase the likelihood of meaningful compatibility. This process highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of contemporary intimacy as single parents navigate between past experiences and future aspirations.

Conclusion

Dating apps represent both an opportunity and a challenge for single parents navigating post-breakup romantic life. Single parents, positioned at the intersection of personal desires and familial responsibilities, engage with dating apps in ways that differ significantly from other demographics. Their experiences illustrate broader societal tensions between individualization and relational commitments, making their journey one of ruptures, resilience, and reimagined intimacy. While dating apps may not offer perfect solutions, they provide an essential space for single parents to explore love and connection in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

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