

## Dating Apps beyond Dating

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Single Motherhood, Sexuality, and Mediated Intimacies on  
Dating Apps

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### Abstract:

The article explores the nuanced and multifaceted experiences of single mothers who use dating apps. Drawing on autoethnographic reflection and participant observation of online community groups, it examines the emotional, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions that influence single mothers' engagements with dating apps. It unpacks the complicated relationship of motherhood and sexuality, challenging prevailing cultural and social stereotypes such as the myth of mothers being asexual beings. The core questions are: What type of intimacies exist in this context? And how does the tension between single motherhood, single womanhood, and sexuality impact subjectivity and self-representation? By examining how single mothers navigate their roles as parents, women, and individuals seeking intimacy in online dating cultures, the study contributes to a broader understanding of contemporary social dynamics and the interplay between technology and identity. The article discusses self-representation, constructions of sexuality, sexual agency, the negotiation of connection and boundaries, and privacy. It argues that when single mothers engage on dating platforms, they navigate the complex terrain of sexual capital through strategies of visibility. In sum, the article delves into the increasing role of technology in the everyday lives, experiences of intimacy, and formations of connections by a contested yet diverse community of single mothers.

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## Single Motherhood, Sexuality, and Mediated Intimacies on Dating Apps

Irida Ntalla

### Introduction

*I have never met a single mother (me included) who is not far more complex, critical, and at odds with the set of cliches she is meant effortlessly to embody than she is being encouraged – or rather instructed – to think.*

– Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers*

Single mothers need to juggle their parenting duties and romantic life, intertwining the maternal and erotic facets of femininity. The epigraph from Jacqueline Rose's account of motherhood captures the intricate way in which single motherhood intersects with matters of sexuality, identity, and societal expectations. This article considers the balance between motherhood and womanhood in the realm of intimacy and sexuality within the digital domain. The findings contribute to the scholarly conversation on maternal sexuality, often sidelined, and aim to broaden existing narratives that normalise single mothers' sexuality and desire. Single motherhood is far from a unified entity; rather, how it is experienced varies, as between the single mother by choice and the stigmatised young single mother, or the lone single mother and the middle-class single mother, to name but a few. This article discusses single motherhood through the lens of autoethnographic notes and digital ethnography, thus focusing on a specific section of these experiences. Single motherhood is often a transitory state and the intricacies surrounding the identity of the 'single mother' start from its very definition, which continued to be marked by social expectations, stigma, and discrimination (Carroll 2019; Morris 2015; Talbot 2021). The single mother, mother and single woman in one, may be in this state only transiently. She is a prime example of capability and autonomy, yet always at risk of being seen as profoundly incapable, a site of ideological double-binds that are always in danger of being unmasked (Rose 2018). Described as 'sinners, scroungers, saints' (Rose 2018: 29) and 'domestic intellectuals' and 'darlings of the popular culture' (Juffer 2006: 9, 4), single mothers do challenge, though not always intentionally, the myth and the internalised fantasy of the nuclear family.

Figures indicate the widespread phenomenon of single parenthood and single motherhood within the context of the United Kingdom (UK): one in four families take this form (ONS 2019); and 83% of the single parents are

women. The use of dating apps, which have become integral to modern romantic experiences, by many of these single mothers marks a significant shift in the history of dating cultures (Hodgson 2017). These mothers navigate the world of online dating influenced by various emotional, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Apps, platforms, and devices impact ways of meeting partners, engaging in and sustaining intimate relationships. The variety of dating apps, a significant part of the growing 'app economy' (Goldsmith 2014), includes popular choices like Bumble, Hinge, OkCupid, and Tinder alongside others such as Plenty of Fish, Happn, Badoo, Facebook Dating, and Match.com as well as options tailored for single parents such as Frolo Dating and PlayDate. Dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge are often seen as restricted to casual interactions, marked by 'negative bonds' which Illouz (2019) describes as short-term, non-committing relationships with minimal self-involvement and little emotional connection, reflecting the condition of hyperconnected modernity. These apps are popular, increasingly socially acceptable, and in some cases arguably essential for meeting new people, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, which further accelerated their rising use (Garcia-Iglesias et al. 2024). This network connectivity alters how we experience intimacy (Hjorth 2011), disrupts and challenges traditional forms of intimacy, and acts as an infrastructure of intimacy introducing new practices, arrangements, and expectations while forging their shapes and intensities (Paasonen 2017). The existing research on single mothers' sexuality and romantic lives is limited (Morris 2015; Stoicescu and Rughiniş 2022). It focuses largely on the psychological consequences of dating on a single mother's mental health (Rousou et al. 2019), the effects of dating on the well-being of a single mother's children (Xiao et al. 2022; Langlais et al. 2016), and the life satisfaction of single mothers (Pollmann-Schult 2018). Single mothers' romantic and sexual goals, challenges, and outcomes are often overlooked and seldom discussed.

The article contributes to the literature on dating cultures through the lens of single mothers who date online. It is an area that requires further analysis considering the proliferation of these online platforms as means to meet partners and the diverse ways intimacy and relationships are formed and navigated. These digitally mediated intimacies have the possibility of challenging but also reproducing heteronormative imaginaries (see Ferris and Duguay 2020; Licoppe 2020). This perspective intersects with the complex narratives of motherhood and sexuality, often filled with contrasting views ranging from victimisation to empowerment, helpful for re-imagining contemporary femininities in the sense of becoming and potentiality (Braidotti 2002). The transition into single motherhood and 'becoming' a single woman shapes experiences with dating. It points to the interplay between autonomy and dependency, with the latter often captured by ideals and fantasies such as the nuclear family as the main form of care and intimacy. The

discussion here provides insight into mothers' sexuality that may exist outside of normative scenarios and social structures and in everyday, though often precarious, forms of pleasure and desire.

The article connects insights from media studies, digital sociology, and anthropology to explore the landscape of online dating. It argues that online dating practices, which often promise a rationalisation of intimacy and romantic encounters and an alchemy of love (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022), serve as the space to unpack the complex intersections of cultural norms and personal identity, particularly for single mothers. By integrating perspectives from my own experiences, this study applies an autoethnographical lens to analyse how single mothers engage with these apps, present themselves, and disclose their motherhood status as part of sexual capital within the broader context of digital intimacies. The article draws on digital ethnography conducted on Facebook groups for single mothers and single parents (predominantly in the UK) from 2020 to 2022. It also engages with TikTok trends and short-form videos that highlight experiences of dating by single mothers.

The article begins with discussions of the research methodology and the theoretical basis for studying single motherhood and online dating, as background for the discussion of the ethnographic data in the subsequent three sections. The first examines the intersection of motherhood and womanhood within the context of single motherhood, exploring the often-conflicted maternal identity and expression of one's sexual self and how these impact one's approach to online dating. This leads to an analysis of practices of single mothers on dating apps, focusing on the management of their online identities and the negotiation of their visibility. Third, the article further discusses how single mothers navigate perceptions and expectations as part of sexual capital, and the strategies of self-disclosure they employ. A brief conclusion reflects on the nuances of such experiences and practices.

It is important to note the limitations of the study: it does not directly address factors such as age, nationality, race, or social class. The lived experiences captured by the methodological approach used in this study are those of heterosexual single mothers within a UK context.

## Methodology

The article draws on autoethnographic notes and on digital ethnography of, first, publicly available discussions on Facebook support groups for single mothers and parents and, second, TikTok trends and videos attached to specific hashtags such as #singlemumdating and #singlemumtok, which I engaged with during a period of two years (2020–2022). Autoethnography as a methodological approach is undertaken retrospectively as a process of recalling, reflecting, and reviewing moments and stories that comprise our lives, finding patterns and key themes that help us understand certain phe-

nomena. Applying this methodology, I visited and revisited observations of dating I had made as a newly single mother in the urban environment of London, undoubtedly with some distance and less urgency and immediacy. As an interpretive method, autoethnography occupies a progressive position because of its valance whilst employing revelation, reflexivity, and self-critique located in the lived experience of the cultural context that is analysed (Johnson-Bailey 2021). It acknowledges lived experience as a social phenomenon that deserves scrutiny, prominence, and value in feminist thought. Writing in the first person focuses on the outwards, the cultural aspects of personal experience (Chang 2008), to expose, inwards, a ‘vulnerable self’ moved by refracting and resisting cultural interpretations (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 739). It is a methodology that is often suited to investigate sensitive or hidden topics. It locates research in emotional life (Ettorre 2016) and opens the scope of speaking about a subject with honesty. Rose (2018) argues that our conception of what it is to be a mother is fatally flawed as such women are often held accountable for societal ills, including the threat to welfare, and are burdened with unrealistic expectations of perfection. This brings to attention the difficult feelings that are associated with motherhood.

The ethics of the self, foundational to autoethnography, demand an ongoing reflection on approaching the experience of single motherhood authentically and with care towards others. In my attempt to include a reflexive narrative of dating as a single mother, I am cognisant of the intense ‘identification’ towards a fixed, primary position and the privilege of ‘voice’ as part of the process. I consider the potential pitfall in the proposition that autoethnography is an art construction to ‘represent the author in a particular way’ (Walford 2020: 35) or enter into a process of self-indulgence or self-absorption. As demonstrated by Sara Ahmed (2014), feminism teaches us that discussing our personal emotions is not about shifting focus away from systemic matters and is not a form of ‘indulgence’. Rather, it is about sharing stories of transition and historical context and instances where we may face constraint and discrimination. These personal accounts should be embraced and seen to contribute to wider narratives instead of being dismissed as self-indulgent or regarded as merely centring on ‘damaged identities’. Recalling my experience of online dating as a single mother, I am aware of my privilege as a white, educated, migrant woman in the UK. I had the experience of simultaneous identities: a woman and a migrant deriving from a working-class background and yet as an adult populating many middle-class spaces which provided me with notable privilege as a single white mother. Ahmed (2014) writes that

*privilege does not mean we are invulnerable: things happen, shit happens. Privilege can however reduce the costs of vulnerability, so if things break down, if you break down, you are more likely to be looked after. When support is a question of access you have a support system.*

An ongoing reflection of the ethnographic work on single mothers in digital spaces relates to my positionality as a researcher in line with the ‘identification’ of a single mother. Who is the single mother, and who can use this term? ‘Single mother’ is a contested term that encapsulates a multitude of lived experiences, related to the intersection of gender, ethnicity, social class, language, and other systems of domination that determine our privileges, inequalities, and proximity to power, including the ‘route’/transition towards being a single mother. I recognise the risk in solidifying certain narratives and understandings of groups of people, with the potential of ‘betrayal’, ‘misrepresentation’, and ‘narrowing’ of the experiences of the communities under consideration and not giving enough credit to the strengths, troubles, and specific needs of single mothers in the diverse forms of single motherhood. I take a critical feminist stance towards the discourse that sees whiteness as a maternal citizenship of the ‘good motherhood’, which is intensified as part of ‘good lone motherhood’ (Carroll and Yeadon-Lee 2022). I am aware that the article focuses on heterosexual single mothers within western norms, considers sexuality in a narrow, binary manner, and does not reflect on race and class. Yet I hope to open the discussion towards the more complex experiences of other single parents and their sexual lives.

Digital ethnography is a valuable tool to engage with narratives on single motherhood and dating. My approach to observing online communities included collecting and analysing twenty online threads and relevant comments from three key Facebook support groups (predominantly within the UK context). I based my selection of threads on keywords on the topic of online dating. The online dating platforms discussed in the threads varied, yet the data collected comes mainly from Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge. My focus lay not specifically on dating but on peer support, networking, and advice on single motherhood and parenting. I collected data by joining online groups, following specific threads, observing, and sometimes participating. Instead of doing participant observation in a classical anthropological sense, I used an approach that can be viewed as ‘observation of participation’ where the ethnographer both experiences and observes their own and others’ co-participation within the ethnographic encounter (Tedlock 1991). Facebook and its community groups provide opportunities for mothers to communicate with existing networks, extend their networks (Lupton et al. 2016), and find specific groups, thus easing their feelings of marginalisation and stigmatisation (Ammari and Schoenebeck 2015). Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, anonymity, and representation are important as the research engages with online discussions. In many of these groups, I shared invitations for women to assist with my research and I was open about my identity as a researcher. At the same time, the accounts and discussions I used for the research are publicly available. I anonymised all people I draw on in this article; and during my research I treated them with respect and care.



The study also draws on content from TikTok attached to specific hashtags, such as #singlemumdating and #singlemumtok. In this context, the disclosure of my identity as a researcher did not play a role. In my choice of content I did not focus on specific videos but examined trends as part of audio memes and narratives that become repetitive because of the platform's algorithm when searching specific hashtags. I examined approximately fifty videos for the key narratives of why or why not one should date a single mum. I interpret these not as individual cultural artifacts but consider them collectively within the broader background of trends and platform-specific languages (Schellewald 2021). TikTok is a platform and tool for entertainment and education, an app to create short-form videos as purposeful digital mediation and storytelling of everyday life. Its short-video format is characterised by a high degree of sociality, immediacy, and playfulness. Many scholars recognise it as a separate and unique category of social media, distinct from its long-form predecessors (Kaye et al. 2022). Angela Lee and her co-authors suggest that TikTok enables self-making not only through introspection but also through the discovery of one's self within the diverse communities and aesthetic styles presented on the 'For You' page, in line with the platform's affordances for user participation and creativity (Lee et al. 2022: 17). In analysing the data from these two platforms, I consider the unique affordances and user interactions specific to each platform. Yet, as the article's focus is not on these two digital spaces as social networking platforms, there are limitations in situating fully the narratives presented. The Facebook groups were mainly focused on the UK context because of my own spatial arrangements, but I do not directly analyse the specific social or socio-demographic contexts of the women quoted in this study. The TikTok content is in English, and I used hashtags that use the spelling 'mums' rather than 'moms' to focus the research spatially. As already noted, the searches led predominantly to white mothers, and a more diverse examination of this would have required deeper explorations of specific hashtags, something that was not feasible within the remit of this article.

### Becoming a single mother

The process of becoming a single mother involves choice and dependency and carries with it expectations and fantasies. Choice may include the ability to leave a harmful relationship whilst dependency often reflects the need for financial and peer support. These factors significantly shape how a single mother approaches dating, desire, and sexual intimacy in everyday life. As Jane Juffer (2006: 31) argues, 'how one becomes a single mom shapes life as a single mom'. Thinking through metamorphosis, Rosi Braidotti (2002: 24–25, 106) sees the 'female corporeal reality' as a process of becoming, incorporating the body closer into her Deleuzian thinking as part of the creation

of gendered sexuality and subjectivity. The subject is never fixed but exists at 'different levels of power and desire, constantly shifting between wilful choice and unconscious drive' (Braidotti 2002: 76-77).

I recall becoming a single mother as a continuous metamorphosis rooted in cultural and intellectual forces and materiality. The possibility of becoming in this instance carries painful adjustments, such as the lack of a stable ground, as demonstrated in the need to reinvent oneself with a child, find appropriate housing, and build a single-headed family, a challenge that may not resonate with all single mothers (for instance, mothers that are single by choice) but is significant for many. Becoming a single mother may not carry the stigma it once did, especially when it represents and maintains the white and middle-class norms of good parenting (Mack 2016: 59). But it also emerges as a state of possible freedom, perhaps expected to break down and counter the myth and deeply internalised ideal of the nuclear family. Yet the question remains: How free are most single mothers to pursue these possibilities, particularly when the social moralities surrounding the two-parent family continue to confer privilege and societal approval (Juffer 2006)?

Single mothers can be portrayed in popular imagery as lacking resilience, but they are also expected by societal structures to have stronger skills than other women to overcome adversity and the affective capacity to survive and weather insecurity and hardship, making them 'heroes'. For me, my ability to 'bounce back' (Gill and Orgad 2018) was strengthened in moments of realisation, and I achieved insight by therapy, conversations, and participation in self-help communities (all of which are not available to all) in which I reflected on what it was that was holding me back. The fantasy of the 'traditional' ideal of the two-parent family maintains the prevalence of certain imageries and 'rational' choices which can lead some mothers to remain tied in harmful relationships. Fantasy here gestures towards psychoanalysis, bringing scenarios, narratives, and social structures that people might desire to be the imagined. Fantasy is not merely imaginary as its reality is intertwined with the reality of our desires. Consequently, fantasy is not antagonistic to social reality; rather, it serves as a precondition or psychic glue (Rose 2004). Acting as a foundational story, the family is deeply entrenched in the core of many cultures, both widely affirmed and intensely criticised. It is crucial to recognise that the contextualisation of intimacy within the family, specifically in the Western paradigm, is assumed to exert a stabilising influence; it organises desire and social reproduction (Balani 2023: 62) and disciplines those who resist the current reproductive order (Gotby 2023: 42). Furthermore, this contextualisation of intimacy acts as a filtering device to social benefits with racialised access (Balani 2023: 63). The increasingly 'equal' division of labour in the two-parent family has led to shifts in formations of intimacy and personal life (Giddens 1993), such as forms of cohabitation. Despite declining marriage and rising divorce rates, family and marriage remain a key



milestone in the narrative of an individual life (Balani 2023). Whilst other kinship forms have become less stigmatised, with a loosening of the traditional sexual dyad and the father-mother-child model, the hegemonic status of the nuclear family remains deeply ingrained, advocated as being the most beneficial for the offspring, equated with intimacy, care, and solidarity, and fantasised about as such. These psychoanalytical and material conditions, rooted deeply in single mothers' social imageries, often oscillate between two contrasting poles: at one end, the rhetoric of autonomy whilst at the other, the imagery of dependency.

The image of the mother within an 'intact family' is constructed around an idealised domestic sphere, where the maternal role is both glorified and restricted by societal expectations of selflessness and moral purity. Rose (2018: 16) argues that expressions of maternal desire are seen as selfish, demanding that mothers save the world from their desires, as if sexuality never existed outside marriage. This captures a critical view of how societal and cultural scripts often perceive and regulate female sexuality within the context of motherhood. The mother's ongoing desire and sexuality after having children is less extensively treated in scholarship (Scerri 2021; Zwalf 2020; Montemurro and Siefken 2012). With the enduring denial of mothers as sexual beings and the notion that good female sexuality should remain within the bounds of marriage (Rooks 2020: 103), the ideology of asexual mothers continues to render mothers' sexuality invisible (Cass 2020: 42). Popular media seems to depict single motherhood in a more complex manner, shifting from narratives of pain to discourses of empowerment but also capturing the messy realities of motherhood, arguably challenging the stigma and shame attached to single motherhood and the feeling of loss of respectability (Morris and Munt 2019). As Jo Littler (2020: 514) notes, portrayals of 'mothers behaving badly', marked by hedonism and domestic chaos, are based on neoliberal conceptions of responsibility and do little to challenge patriarchy. Cumulatively such representations work to bring visibility to mothers' desires; they position sex and sexuality in the everyday as something that has to be managed, just like every other aspect of everyday life (Juffer 2006: 58–59). The single mother, 'free and irresponsible, sexually promiscuous and available to men' (McIntosh 1996: 154), is judged against the mother in the outdated 'good mother' myth (Scerri 2021). 'Manipulative or sexual, the single mother exhibits either too much control over her sexual life or not enough', argues Rose (2018: 36) in her consideration of teenage single mothers, who have been subject to scrutiny for long for a perceived lack of sexual control and/or an active sexual life. Amongst this, there is the archetype of the 'MILF' (Mother I'd Like to Fuck) that is assigned to desirable mothers: whilst it acknowledges maternal desire beyond caregiving, it also reflects a raced and classed objectification of single mothers, idealising them as the sexual hot mummy and placing high expectations on them (Friedman 2014: 51–52).

### Motherhood and womanhood: between invisibility and visibility

Becoming a single mother forms the narrative backbone of this study. It brings an array of challenges, such as the emotional ‘baggage’ a single mother carries, her internalised ‘imperfections’, and her positionality that may influence her entry into the algorithmic dating culture. Shifting from being a mother to becoming a sexual being, a woman again, a metamorphosis occurs as the woman enters the realm of intimacy and sexuality. A comic strip by cartoonist Anna Härmälä (2024) captures this sentiment. A single mother, contemplating the daunting prospect of engaging in new sexual encounters, exclaims: ‘It’s just so unfair. Everything is completely reorganised inside. Pushing out 4 kg for hours. Now I have to try sex with someone entirely new. I’m like a virgin again, a virgin mother.’ The metaphor of the ‘virgin mother’ encapsulates the paradox many mothers face, yet the conflict between maternal identity and sexual being seems more visible in single motherhood. Whilst virginity has traditionally been associated with purity and chastity, it also signifies sexuality as a social value. Scholarship has identified three ‘social roles’ in which women are commodities of exchange: the ‘mother’, ‘excluded from exchange’, part of the domestic sphere; the ‘virginal woman’, who ‘is pure exchange value’; and, finally, the ‘prostitute’, whose value ‘has already been realised’ (Irigaray 1985: 184, 185, 186). These female archetypes of the virgin, the mother, and the whore are deeply rooted in Christianity, speak to women’s sexuality, and exist in society and all shared social expectations.

When I entered the online dating scene as a newly separated woman with a child in the early 2020s, the experiences I made were distinctly different from the ones I had made in 2010 during a previous, more limited engagement with dating apps. Then, online dating felt more like a novelty (particularly on the heterosexual love market), whereas now it has become a commonplace that I was about to navigate. The anecdotes that single women share in Facebook discussion threads in the early 2020 vary widely. One woman describes her initial experience like this: ‘I am single after sixteen years relationship. I downloaded Bumble the other day ... Took me an hour to realise swiping right means I am expressing interest ... I keep swiping wrong.’ In this setting of mediated dating, a swipe with the finger to the right makes an interaction with another person possible: it solidifies a match and realises a mutual attraction. Dating apps thus produce new affordances such as swiping, liking, matching, and texting, and a related etiquette and grammar when users figure out how to deal with this techno-social milieu (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). They also produce new narratives, with the question ‘Do they work?’ a common one in online threads where single mothers who are dating share details about their tactics and experiences of contemporary romance.

In online dating cultures, Tinder is often a popular choice, as it is well-known and established across the globe. Especially in the context of the UK,

it is widely accepted as not for 'serious' encounters, with many utilising it as a hook-up app for sexual encounters. My initial attempts at using dating apps as a single mum were with Tinder. I was not on Tinder to seek or find my 'soulmate'; rather, I saw it as a recreational activity, a playful space to seek validation and combat feelings of loneliness. This is one way in which dating apps are used: the seeking of casual sex, ego boosting, and entertainment (Hobbs et al. 2017). The scholarly literature understands dating apps as providing 'network intimacy' (Nebeling Peterson et al. 2017: 5; see also Chambers 2021) that allow a plethora of connections and experiences. Dating online is argued to exemplify 'liquid love', characterised by fragile 'human bonds in an age of ... individualisation, consumerism, and rapid ... change' (Hobbs et al. 2017: 274), where long-term and stable form of relationships are replaced with recreational activities (Bauman, cited in Hobbs et al. 2017: 274). Contrary to this view, these apps 'are not [broadly] "liquefying" ideals like romantic love, monogamy or a commitment to longer-term relationship' but rather expand the possibilities available compared to previous generations, where technology is used as a mean to seek meaningful connections (Hobbs et al. 2017: 281).

Tinder, launched in 2012, primarily matches users by local proximity and requires users to upload only a few photos and write an optional brief text; it does not employ detailed filters or request users to answer questions to establish compatibility (Ward 2019: 132). Although Tinder does not require actual images of the user – it only requests users to respect intellectual property and the privacy rights of others – self-representation becomes crucial. In the culture of Tinder and other dating apps, crafting an effective presentation of the self is key not only to attracting attention and increasing desirability but also to managing one's visibility strategically. An 'individual could choose to mask their gender', face, and body; nonetheless it could be conducive to upload such images to successfully use the app, as visual cues are used 'as resources for making identities intelligible' (MacLeod and McArthur 2019).

My sole Tinder profile photo, which I kept for some time, captured in a blurred interplay of beige, white, and black hues a fleeting glimpse of a woman in motion – an image purposefully enigmatic and unidentifiable. 'Tinder offers subjects a point of identification as desiring and desirable, hence opening a space of enquiry into one's and the other's desire' (Bandinelli and Bandinelli 2021: 181). The use of such apps allows the user to 'interpret, judge, imagine, wonder, fantasise' (Bandinelli and Bandinelli 2021: 188). Even though my Tinder account lacked a distinct profile picture, I received several matches, possibly reflecting the app's male-heavy membership and men's preference for casual hook-ups (Lopes and Vogel 2019). Where a clear facial picture provides a 'form of insurance ... acting as a promise of what one can expect in real life' (Mowlabocus 2016: 104), the lack of one requires further digital

labour once a match has been made, including chatting to establish interest ('What are you looking for?'), establishing elements of trust, and sharing images. For users who seek transparency, optimisation, and, especially, speed, this approach wastes time as it adds an unnecessary 'mysterious' element with no potential for pursuit. The use of discreet images or pictures of headless torsos echoes methods employed by gay men and queer individuals who wish for confidentiality and discretion on platforms like Gaydar and Grindr (see Licoppe 2020). It maintains a veil of anonymity and offers a shield against stigma and prejudice, which users might consider necessary, especially in certain socio-geographical landscapes. This digital act plays with achieving a delicate balance between revealing and concealing in a context where private desire meets public identity. For me, privacy was key, for reasons of proximity to the father of my daughter, other parents, and the local community. 'What if my child's father comes across my Tinder profile? What if someone from the school environment also uses these apps? Would that put me in the spotlight? Would that make me a bad mother?' Thoughts like these crossed my mind at the time. They point towards the imbalance that marks the societal stereotype that if a mother is sexually active, she is a bad mother and does not prioritise her children. Amanda Kane Rooks (2020: 117) in her analysis of Sue Miller's *The Good Mother* unpacks a cautionary tale showing that mothers often face the greatest consequences for attempting to exercise sexual freedom. 'Apparently, I'm a disgusting whore and it's too soon to be dating,' writes a Facebook user as she comments on being spotted by a family member on an online dating app. 'Single mothers ... your dating days are over ... focus on your kids ... no time for anything else for me,' says another person on the same thread. These gendered charges of immorality exist, but individual women may experience them differently. During this phase, I chose to reveal my identity as a single mother selectively, and information about my child was not part of my dating life. In their research on single mothers using dating apps, Maria Stoicescu and Cosima Rughiniş conclude that participants justified using Tinder because they saw it as a tool to manage their intimate needs, with some seeing their motherhood as 'somehow separate' from to their social and romantic identity (Stoicescu and Rughiniş 2022: 979). This may indicate that the women had 'internalised' the stereotype and societal attitude that sexual activity conflicts with maternal responsibilities, even as they were aware that this area of life was a key component in their care for their self (Juffer 2006: 59).

Tinder's gamified approach to dating allowed me to navigate the dating scene at my own pace, building skills in online intimacy and gradually progressing towards in-person interactions. A comment from a Facebook thread speaks to such experience: 'I am forty-four and after twenty-two years of marriage got into online dating apps. It's brilliant for your self-esteem and to improve your flirting/banter.' Tinder and similar apps foster a sense of 'per-

sonal autonomy and control' (Chambers 2013: 122), as they make users feel active and empowered in navigating a 'dating life' and in rediscovering their sexual and romantic identity. Stoicescu and Rughiniş (2022: 975) note that 'by using the app, single mothers may feel empowered to manage their dating activities and address their desires'. They identify four types of motives: freedom and liberation; entertainment; the cultivation of eroticism and intimacy; and temporal justifications (such as time wasting or time efficiency). Neoliberal ideas such as autonomy, esteem, and the capacity for self-expression encourage individuals to seek new experiences and creatively reinvent their subjectivities, contributing to what Dana Kaplan and Eva Illouz (2022: 88) call 'neoliberal sexual capital'. Illouz (2012: 162) considers dating apps as 'technologies of choice', where making the 'right choice' is central for navigating the market of romance (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022: 2) and the right choice is relevant to the user's motives. My research shows that the primary concern may not be the right choice nor the burden of the responsibility of picking a romantic partner. Rather, in initial phases of dating, where Tinder acts as a playful and entertaining space, its affordances and features allow an experience of inbetweenness: being seen and unseen, private and exposed at once. On reflection, this inbetweenness helped me move from an inherent guilt that is often linked with motherhood to embracing that complex area of womanhood that is fraught with challenging standards. For a single mother, the process from motherhood to womanhood is a negotiation between, on the one hand, being a single woman entering the dating scene and managing an online identity as single and, on the other, being a mother concerned with privacy and discretion. Key components in navigating the digital space are societal judgements of single mothers who are sexually active and yet responsible as parents, gendered stereotypes, and the social and romantic identities enabled by the affordances and features of online apps.

### Navigating perceptions and sexual capital

During my dating period as single mother, a significant connection I formed viewed my identity with admiration. This perspective mirrored the heroic portrayal of a single mother as a prime example of capability and autonomy: it acknowledged and fetishised the effort involved in managing everything independently. In this portrayal, single mothers are seen as hard workers, their resilience is celebrated (internally and externally), and their strengths, capacities, and gifts capture the imagination.

On TikTok, single mother creators narrate their experiences as they open up spaces for discussion, spaces in which men have a lot to say about single mothers, their dating lives, and their sexual capital. Male creators would often respond to questions set by single mother creators as to why, or why not, they dated single mums. One such answer was the following:



*Step aside boys, I have this one. I will give you four reasons for dating single mums. Nothing is more attractive to a grown man than a woman who is strong, who is a fighter, fierce and ferocious, and will protect her cubs at all costs. Number two, she is incredibly loyal, which is so important to every single guy in the market. Number three, all you boys have been talking about going to her house to eat her snacks. You missed the most important part; she is the snack. Number four and the most important, they are the novel shit, cut to the chase, right here, right now, all the way in or all the way out.*

The statement, embraced by many single mothers on the platform, invites women to become moral subjects – heroes and warriors – through their enactment and sense of resilience, responsibility, loyalty, and maturity. This male creator’s characterisation of single mothers as ‘the snack’ is loaded and requires scrutiny: with it the creator aims to capture the desirability of the single mother as he ‘educates’ others whom he describes as having a ‘boyish attitude’ and not acting as ‘real men’. This narrative is shared and imitated by other male and female creators who advise others on how and why to date single mothers in line with the affordances of the platform, which promote replication and mimesis (Abidin 2021; Zulli and Zulli 2022).

Sociologists and other sex researchers use the concept of sexual capital to explain how sexual subjectivities, experiences, and interactions – including actions, feelings, and thoughts – are used by social agents to their advantage, be it in economic markets, in marriage markets, or in sexual encounters (Kaplan and Illouz 2022: 31). What has enabled the formation of sexual capital is the loosening of the social norms and taboos that regulate sexuality, along with the increasing incorporation of sexuality into the economic field (Kaplan and Illouz 2022: 5). A single mother’s attractiveness and her sex appeal (‘she is the snack’) reflect her personal sexual attributes, and her sexual competence (‘cut to the chase ... all the way in or all the way out’) contributes to her sexual capital. The latter, relating to ‘embodied sexual capital’ or sexual know-how, improves the individual’s status in the relationship market (Kaplan and Illouz 2022: 84). Her loyalty and mothering practices (‘will protect her cubs at all costs’), which reflect her self-worth, as well as her self-confidence (‘fighter, fierce and ferocious’) are all desirables that form neoliberal sexual capital. The authors’ conceptualisation and taxonomy of sexual capital integrates sexual and non-sexual advantages into the economic sphere: in it the seemingly distinct private domain of sex, sexuality, and reproduction intersects with the public sphere of economy within a historically nuanced structural perspective.

‘You’ve arrived at milftok ... enjoy all the snacks’, responds a single mother creator. The MILF acronym, perceived to be a porn genre and a source of empowerment all in one, exposes a problematic archetype of popular culture



(Friedman 2014): moving to the other edge of motherhood as a purely sexual being. The acronym shifts the assumption that mothers are silent about their sexual desire and depicts them through a raced, classed, and objectifying term. On TikTok, we can glimpse white, blonde women in front of brightly lit backgrounds displaying their bodies upfront, posing invitingly, with the focus directed to the body parts attractive to younger men. Hash-tags like #milftok and #cougaroftiktok are predominantly used by men who express their desires in response to videos, finding their niche on TikTok. Digital domains and the 'mamasphere' (Wilson and Yochim 2017) provide a broader public sphere for negotiating and monetising motherhood. In this case, TikTok creators make visible the sexuality and desires of single mothers in what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018: ix) refers to as an 'economy of visibility'. We see mothers labelled and represented as MILFs, potentially owning their sexuality but at the same time being owned by existing portrayals and the 'tyranny of sexiness' (Martin, cited in Friedman 2014: 51). Motherhood is not primary in this imagery and kids are rarely present, showing that single women maintain the dualism of motherhood and sexuality. MILFs on TikTok (be they celebrities or not) are also desired by younger LGBT+ women, expanding the understanding of heteronormative bonds. This form of desire is predominantly showcased by younger women, with MILFs again taking a passive role but seemingly consenting to this positioning (in some cases being in the background, feeling desired and enjoying being adored). This may also be seen as bringing visibility to non-normative sexualities and desires, yet the mere act of making such imageries and representations visible comes to stand as a political act in and of itself, often leaving existing invisibilities and structural inequalities unchallenged (Van Cleef 2020: 39).

Yet, the acronym MILF also subjects single mothers to unwarranted assumptions and expectations. 'This morning a twenty-year-old was harassing me to take me on a date because MILFs are his fetish [three laughing emojis],' writes a Facebook user on a thread. While this stereotype is something of a media mythology, it fetishises the maternal and feminine roles of single and older mothers by casting their sexuality as liberated and promiscuous. In my own online dating experience, several dates that came about when I openly identified as a single mother were steeped in these MILF stereotypes. Yet whilst the acronym seems to allow single mothers to be sexy and naughty, it simply captures them in a mechanism of 'objectification in [a] new and even more pernicious guise' (Gill 2003: 105). The expectation and visibility of sexual freedom is not necessarily politically transgressive. The comment 'Someone contacted me on Instagram the other day, presumably because I was using the hashtag single mum, so he must have assumed I was thirsty' by another Facebook user confirms this. These anecdotal experiences, the sexualising of mothers, and, specifically, the eroticisation of single mothers do not disrupt the sexual-maternal divide (Zwalf 2020) and do not in any

pragmatic terms consider the actual conditions under which single mothers seek healthy sexual relationships.

I argue that single mothers, when they engage in self-disclosure on dating platforms, are not just sharing personal details but are navigating the complex terrain of sexual capital through strategies of visibility. This involves a strategic revelation of personal information that intersects with the utilisation of sexual attributes for personal advantage. Self-disclosure refers to the act of an individual conveying information about themselves to another person (Wheeless 1976). It influences relationships, especially romantic ones, as it helps individuals gather information on potential dates and the viability of future relationships (Greene et al. 2006). The choice around disclosure is also shaped by the norms and expectations of each app (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022).

### Practices of self-disclosure

In the second phase of my online dating as single mother, I switched to Bumble and Hinge, each with its own specific functions. Bumble is generally perceived to be more ‘serious’ than Tinder, whilst Hinge is considered a reputable option especially amongst creatives and intellectuals (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022). I started to share carefully curated photos of myself. Both apps use engaging prompts to persuade daters to populate their profiles with pictures and personal and other relevant information. These elements are designed to attract prospective matches and optimise the functionality of the apps. Notable on Bumble is the option for women to initiate the conversation once a match is made. The app integrates the topic of children and parenting and one’s ideal plan for reproduction through questions such as ‘What are your ideal plans for children?’, for which it provides the following set of possible answers, apart from the option of not answering the question at all:

- I want someday.
- I don’t want.
- I have and I want more.
- I have and I don’t want more.
- I am not sure yet.
- I have kids.
- I am open to kids.

Similarly, Hinge prompts users to disclose whether they have children, want more, and/or are open to children.

What are the strategies of self-disclosure in relation to one’s single motherhood? Do single mothers declare their identities? Looking back, I realise that my approach was varied and somewhat erratic and inconsistent, as I frequently changed my settings whilst navigating feelings of maternal and sexual ambivalence. These sentiments included anxiety of exposure and the

fear that I may have shared too much about myself in these digital domains that are accessible to so many, whilst the manner of my exposure was directly related to the number of matches I received and the type of daters I attracted. Part of the ambivalence I felt was triggered by a sense of dishonesty: while the affordances and the set-up of the apps require personal information, which prompts truthfulness and trustworthiness, the dating apps rely on self-representation, which often includes a degree of deception (McGloin and Denes 2018). The threads on the Facebook groups show that single mothers pay close attention to self-disclosure and position themselves based on their intentions and their relationship with the digital, including considerations of safety. One user stated: 'I tell them straight away [that I have children] so [that] I can weed out the ones that aren't wanting anything serious.' Another wrote: 'I would say on my profile ... mother of ... .' These comments capture the idea that dating apps rely on 'efficiency' to connect busy individuals who may not have enough time and energy to look for love (Hobbs et al. 2017). It is common to spend a lot of time preparing a dating profile online to produce a desirable presentation of myself that would 'stand out' from 'competitors', something that Bandinelli and Gandini (2022: 427) have discussed in line with digital self-branding and the branded self. Nonetheless, as the authors (2022: 429) note, this ecosystem is characterised by structural uncertainty because of 'accepted irrationalities and ... the inherent dimension of risk', which makes it difficult to build up relationships of trust.

Safety played a significant role for me in my use of dating apps, and I would never share information about my child. In the threads, many mothers are concerned with potentially attracting 'weirdos', and in online discussions many try to convince others not to advertise that they have children. Concerns related to privacy and security include the risk of encountering sexual predators and cyberstalking (Spitzberg and Hoobler 2002), and this may be more prominent when children are involved. The complexity of disclosure undoubtedly also comes from externalised stigma and internalised guilt and shame (Morris 2015), as captured in this Facebook comment by a single mother: 'I also don't like people knowing my business and judging me.' Other tactics of self-disclosure involve a more 'organic' approach. 'If you match, then you can mention it,' one user wrote, with another explaining that 'there is no way I would hide the fact I have kids for any length of time'. Dating apps rely mainly on appearance, by which users quickly establish whether they find someone attractive, a decision which is often quite impulsive. Beyond this first stage, there is the chatting process through the app's messaging system. During this phase those who are matched gain knowledge about each other, and this practice of 'questioning' (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022: 426) initiates a process of sharing and helps to build interpersonal trust. The experience of navigating these socially mediated exchanges – 'reading the room' to understand the appropriate level of sharing – marks a distinct phase

of online dating. It demands time, energy, confidence, and social capital, critical for forming potential relationships. During this phase the engagement becomes more complex: it is influenced by whether the matched individuals manage to identify a common outlook and shared desires and fantasies in the pursuit of a romantic encounter. The length of this article cannot fully capture the continuous identity work required as a relationship progresses.

The comment 'I did [disclose my single mother identity] every time and that's when I don't hear from them again' from a mother on Facebook sparked conversations. Similar ones take place on TikTok, and memes underscore the recurring challenge for single mothers navigating the online dating scene. Desirability is impacted by such disclosures, for potential partners may consider a mother with a child as too much to manage. This reminds us of the historically rooted role of chastity and the traditional view of reproduction as part of domesticity. Scrolling through single mothers' online forums and threads reveals a common narrative: as a single mother, you enter the dating life with a 'baggage'. Children are seen as 'baggage', something that often leads interested men to 'ghosting', or withdrawing from a relationship without explanation, as explained by the single mother entrepreneur Zoe Desmond. She took this as inspiration to launch her own dating app, Frolo Dating (Libbert 2021), an app that promotes ideal self-branding based on everyday lived experiences of sexuality and motherhood. She uses the perception of children as 'baggage' and turns it into a positive 'unique selling proposition' or 'USP' for single parents to use when building their profile on her app. Her app, Frolo Dating, but also PlayDate, another dating app for single parents, require full disclosure of the user's parenting situation and details about their children.

Yet one date bluntly told me that if my status as a mother was transparent on the dating app, they would not match with me. 'I would not date a single mother as I don't want to [be a] father [to] your children,' seems to be a common sentiment. The level and approach to self-disclosure depends on the single mother's motives, but motherhood is always key, as illustrated by this Facebook comment: 'I make it obvious straight away as she [her daughter] will be part of my life, so [there is] no point dating someone without telling them from the get-go.' Similarly, a TikTok creator explained: 'I am not looking for a baby dad; I am looking for an orgasm.' Many TikTok's single mother creators are keen to show the benefits and realities of dating single mothers. These narratives emphasise single mothers owning their sexuality and actively countering the notion that they are passive or asexual. They respond to experiences where potential partners withdraw after learning of their single mother status, thereby affirming their sexual agency and desire. These self-presentations embody the standards of sexiness in the dating market, where sexual capital is a personal, embodied attribute. The single mother's body here is an 'emblem of liberation, fun ... pleasure and pride' (Attwood

2004: 15). Exclamations such as ‘You look nothing like you had a kid or you gave birth’ have become a common way to ‘praise’ the single mother, adding to the existing discourses of the ‘yummy mummy’ and the sexy and active mother. Such ‘compliments’, which ostensibly confirm a woman’s desirability and sexual autonomy, operate within a framework that can be both liberating and objectifying, simultaneously challenging and reinforcing internalised misogyny, a pertinent subject for sociopolitical analysis as to how it shapes and reflects women’s experiences.

I was present on dating apps during the Covid-19 pandemic: digital intimacies were heightened, which highlighted dating apps beyond the perspective of an in-person, embodied date, and online daters found that ‘sexting is better than the real thing’ (Lord, cited in Bandinelli and Bandinelli 2021: 194). Sexting, a form of intimate communication between two strangers, can be seen as a shared experience. It hints at the shift of the erotic to a highly individual form of hedonism which is pursued through episodic and uncommitted encounters and achieved through forms of auto-eroticism (Attwood 2004: 80) and acceptance of self-pleasure. At the same time comments on online threads show single mothers’ frustration of receiving unsolicited pictures, predominantly by men, something which has become common practice and well-known amongst people who use dating apps. This behaviour is motivated by a ‘sex imperative’ linked to gender (Attwood 2006: 59), a preoccupation with self-revelation and exposure. As other comments reveal, single mothers are aware of their sexual preferences, with objectives of achieving ‘fun and desirability’ from short-term or long-term interactions. Several comments from an online thread capture this sentiment well: ‘I like a bit of naughtiness but ... it is hard work’; ‘I am far too tired from the sexting labour.’ Dating apps are often perceived and experienced as ‘addictive’ and time consuming (Stoicescu and Rughiniş 2022), leading users to disconnect from them, though later often reactivating their accounts again. This pattern underscores the time management required by single mothers, who must balance domesticity, work, and a sex life – in the absence of a solid support network. The gendered nature of intimate life and caregiving is intertwined with the single mother’s emotional life and sociality, including sexuality, and has moved to the digital space (Dobson et al. 2018). In this discussion, the emotional and affective labour as part of the process of dating online also involves the labour of navigating perceptions and ideals around motherhood. The question ‘How do you find the time to date and balance childcare and work?’ is a common starting point in these online discussions and a shared reality that reflects the dual burden of managing both visible and invisible labour. Responses are detailed, filled with tips and emotional support, with messages of resilience but also with those of despair. Chatting and sexting whilst the kids are in bed captures some of the labour that is required to maintain a dating life and satisfy one’s sexual desire. Dating apps can offer



enjoyment that does not involve physical interaction yet adds to one's sense of desirability. They are grounded in the possibility of a romantic encounter which is likely never to be fulfilled – an experience of the impossibility of completeness (Bandinelli and Bandinelli 2021: 190).

## Conclusion

A question that frequently arises in online discussions amongst single mothers is, 'So, are these apps working?' This is not surprising seeing that many romance novels and popular media have single mothers nearly always married by the end of the story (Juffer 2006: 61). Apps too are used with the intention to find the 'soulmate', and examples of new online dating apps such as Frolo Dating and PlayDate suggest that spaces for single mothers to meet single fathers are evidently on the rise, potentially contributing to the expected happy ending. Yet the real-life situation of single mothers, at least those using dating apps in the UK, is different and more complicated, as this article illuminates. It examines the intricate experiences of single mothers with online dating and the complex ways in which they navigate their subjectivities, motherhood, and sexuality in these spaces. It understands personal and lived experiences as processes of self-reflexivity, 'not as an individual activity but an interactive process that relies upon a social network of exchange' along with digital ethnography aiming towards a 'feminist knowledge that brings out aspects of our existence, especially our own implication with power, that we had not noticed before' (Braidotti 2002: 13).

I argue that becoming a single mother markedly influences how one approaches online dating. Becoming a single mother requires resilience and demands that she navigates deeply engrained fantasies about family formations negotiated through gender roles and patriarchal structures, all of which shape her choices and experiences. The sexual experiences of a woman are intertwined with her experiences of motherhood, requiring her to negotiate a culturally imposed conflict between being sexual and being a mother (Cass 2020: 41). This tension between her maternal identity and her personal desire is shaped by societal roles and archetypes that define how single mother's sexuality is perceived. Sexuality and motherhood are matters that are generally discussed separately, pointing to a taboo of the sexual maternal (Zwalf 2020), which shapes the perception of single mother's sexuality in the online dating cultures. This demands closer scholarly attention.

Platforms such as Tinder provide ways for single mothers to re-engage with their sexual identity, enabling them to carefully manage their role as single mothers into their romantic pursuits. It allows them to selectively integrate their identity as single mothers into their dating life, emphasising their sexual and romantic identities as discreet yet integral parts of their overall personhood and motherhood. The study also shows that on dating



apps like Hinge and Bumble, the prevalent perceptions and visibility of single motherhood play a crucial role. The features and affordances of these apps extend beyond merely choosing potential partners; they are skilfully used to manoeuvre through the complex landscape of sexual capital – a concept which expands from that of erotic capital, understood as a personal (often feminine) asset that women deploy both in the labour market and intimate relationships (Hakim 2010). Key insights of this study reveal that dating apps offer a playful and flexible approach to dating by which single mothers can tactically manage their sexual identity and autonomy and experiment with and re-invent their subjectivities, potentially contributing to their neoliberal sexual capital. Historically and socially conditioned, it encompasses the benefits individuals gain from investing time, knowledge, and affective energy in cultivating and enhancing their sexual selves (Kaplan and Illouz 2022).

The study demonstrates how popular imageries of single motherhood become important in the women's practices of self-disclosure whilst using dating apps. They may use the apps' affordances and features not merely for making the 'right choice' but for strategically navigating the realm of sexual capital, potentially challenging the discourse around single motherhood and sexuality. Challenging the view of sex and sexuality as an essentially private matter, of sexual capital as a purely personal asset, and of the sphere of reproduction as outside sexual capital, the article considers single mothers' experiences on dating apps beyond seeking romantic love. It rather sees them as entangled in gendered dynamics, inseparable from marketability, labour, and neoliberal attributes. Looking forward, this study opens up avenues for further investigating the diverse experiences of single mothers across different sociocultural backgrounds and for expanding understandings of the intersections of motherhood and sexuality in the complex dynamics of dating, intimacy, and identity in the digital age.

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