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In search of the appeal of the 'DILF'

Flora Oswald^a, Shelby Hughes^b, Amanda Champion^c and Cory L. Pedersen^b

^aDepartments of Psychology and Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA, USA; ^bDepartment of Psychology, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Surrey, Canada; ^cDepartment of Criminology, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada

ABSTRACT

Contemporary culture has afforded a new sexualised identity to fatherhood. Fathers are often labelled as nurturing, dominant, and domesticated; attributes demonstrably appealing to females. Colloquially, the sexy dad has come to be referred to as 'DILF' (i.e., Dad I'd Like to Fuck), a concept popularised in the media since its debut online in 2011. DILFs are increasingly searched for by women on pornography websites, evidence of an increasing sexual interest in or awareness of the DILF phenomenon. As the DILF is reflective of shifts in popular culture pertaining to media, gendered parenting, notions of masculinity, and women's sexual expression, this study explored whether women find DILFs more attractive than otherwise equally attractive men without children. Female participants were randomly assigned to one of two possible male profile conditions of the same attractive man (with children versus without children). Results revealed that women rated the male target with children as possessing more positive attributes relative to the male target without children. Follow-up analyses revealed more positive emotional attributes ascribed to the DILF target condition, whereas more positive social attributes were ascribed to the non-DILF target condition. Results are discussed in reference to the changing landscape of masculinity and fatherhood.

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In the past decade, a new category of parental sexualisation has emerged: the 'DILF', or Dad I'd Like to Fuck (Smith, 2018). While no distinct definition of the DILF exists, certain characteristics designate a man as a DILF. Smith's (2018) semiotic media analysis of DILFs delineates some characteristics typically associated with the DILF; typically, he is a mature, middle-aged adult male with children, who is presumably deemed attractive for his maturity, wisdom, and domesticated masculinity. While there is little consensus on the DILF's idealised physical appearance, he is commonly associated with a toned physique, often coupled with tattoos, and comparable to the likes of David Beckham and Adam Levine (Smith, 2018). Further, though popular culture has largely construed the DILF as a single and available relationship partner, he is not necessarily; that is, singlehood is not a prerequisite for DILF status and a DILF may indeed be partnered. This distinction may in part explain why the DILF as a concept has gained so much cultural currency without a parallel impact on, for example, trends in women's marriage to older men.

Although the concept of sexualised parenthood may have existed for much longer, the categorical terms used to describe it – DILF and MILF (Mother I'd Like to Fuck) – are relatively new in popular culture (Friedman, 2014; Smith, 2018). Both terms label a parental figure imbued with sexualisation;

CONTACT Cory L. Pedersen  cory.pedersen@kpu.ca  Department of Psychology, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, 126 72nd Avenue, Surrey, BC V3W 2M8, Canada

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however, while sexualisation of the MILF is generally decoupled from her maternal position (e.g., Friedman, 2014), the role of fatherhood appears central to the DILF's identity and sexual appeal (Smith, 2018), suggesting the unique role of gender in the sexualisation of parental status.

Despite widespread documentation in popular culture, scientific inquiry on the DILF phenomenon is virtually nonexistent. Although sometimes conceptualised as a passing colloquialism, the DILF trend is reflective of shifts in popular culture pertaining to media, gendered parenting, notions of masculinity, and women's sexual expression. This unique cultural intersection, resulting in the emergence of the DILF, merits empirically driven investigation.

Situated against this contemporary cultural backdrop, the current work thus seeks to explore the factors contributing to women's attraction to DILFs, contrasting this to women's attraction to men without children. First, we outline the emergence of the DILF in media. Next, we turn our attention to the intersection of gender and parenting to understand the sexualisation of the DILF before situating the DILF within contemporary discourses of masculinity. Finally, we examine how cultural shifts in understanding of women's sexual expression and desire have promoted the emergence of the DILF, embedding theory from numerous areas of psychology into this discussion.

The DILF in popular culture

The term 'DILF' appears to have emerged in media around 2011 and has propagated since (Smith, 2018); the social media site Instagram is now home to numerous DILF-admiring communities including *DILFs of Disneyworld* and *DILFs of Disneyland*, among others, and the hashtag #DILF has been applied to over 350,000 posts. In addition, the colloquial terms 'DILF' and 'daddy' are increasingly being keyed into search engines on pornography websites (Hawkins, 2018). While 'DILF' and 'daddy' in pornographic use both sexualise paternal terminology, the term 'daddy' has typically been used to refer specifically to mature men, regardless of paternal status (e.g., Mercer, 2012). In contrast, the DILF represented in popular culture necessarily has children; the nurturance and emotionality represented in his relationship with his children is seemingly central to the DILF's identity and sexual appeal (Smith, 2018), a nurturance and emotionality long in tension, but paired with more traditional notions of masculinity as rugged and strong (e.g., Tosh, 1994). Though gay subcultures have also co-opted the DILF term as a synonym for daddy (e.g., Peregrin, 2012), we focus herein on the popular notion of the DILF as a sexualised parental figure, generally situated within heterosexual popular culture.

Gendered and sexualised parenthood

Fundamentally, it appears that the popular appeal of the DILF may lie in the characteristics he is assumed to possess. These characteristics are commonly attributed to his role as a father rather than specific physical traits. The maturity, physical strength, and dominance of the DILF, coupled with doting on children and performing childcare tasks traditionally relegated to the mother, has created the sexy dad; an idealised combination of strong but sweet, mature but playful, masculine but still willing to engage in domestic tasks (Smith, 2018).

While the DILF is attractive *because* of his parental role, the MILF, in contrast, is attractive *despite* hers. The DILF is attractive for his domesticated sexiness; the MILF is regarded for her predatory sexual prowess (Friedman, 2014). Heinrich (2008) delineates how the MILF violates traditional notions of motherhood – which construct the mother as one who gives selflessly to her family – by seeking her own (sexual) pleasure and harnessing her own sexual agency. The DILF similarly violates traditional expectations of fatherhood; his performance of hands-on domestication (Smith, 2018) contrasts with the traditional notion of fathers as emotionally absent, career-oriented economic providers uninvolved with psychological support and care (e.g., Pederson & O'Mara, 1990). Along uniquely gendered lines, it is this violation of traditional roles which renders both parental

figures sexy. Thus, the DILF is a new, domestic form of sexy – one which necessitates and indeed encapsulates a new form of masculinity.

Masculinity and the DILF

A domesticated masculinity has been somewhat in fashion since issues of gender equality entered the global stage in the 1970's (Smith, 2018); the entrance of women into more empowered roles in society forced masculinity to adapt to new conceptualisations of gender relations (e.g., Chapman & Rutherford, 1988; Smith, 2018). However, this domesticated masculinity reveals a longer history; historians of masculinity have noted such a masculinity which prized restraints on physical aggression, commitments to the home and household, and domestic habits since at least the eighteenth century (Bailey, 2010; Hunt, 1996; Tosh, 2005).

The importance placed on the home and household in this domesticated masculinity integrated men's role as the breadwinner of the family with a playful and indulgent notion of fatherhood (King, 2012; Strange, 2012; Tosh, 1994); labour was often taken as an 'emotive mechanism' (Strange, 2012, p. 1019) of care and emotional investment in children. Nurturing and intimate components of fatherhood were negotiated through physical intimacy and privileged disruptions of the authoritarian family structure, which allowed children the opportunity to intrude on the usually private and heralded spaces of their fathers (Strange, 2013).

Modern shifts towards a new manifestation of domesticated masculinity (Smith, 2018) have also created fatherhood as an arena for intimacy and nurturance; fathers are able to experience and express emotionality in ways typically prevented by hegemonic masculinity discourses, which impose restrictive emotionality (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). This notion of fatherhood as an opportunity for emotionality is well-suited to contemporary feminist discourse, which continues to encourage men to distance themselves from the tenets of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

The unique masculinity associated with fatherhood is a subject of our current inquiry. We sought to examine whether a DILF target [a man with children] would be rated differently than an equally attractive, non-DILF target [without children] on a number of attributes associated with hegemonic masculinity (e.g., power, strength, confidence, authority), as well as a number of traits associated with fatherhood (e.g., empathy, dependability, good with children).

Discourses of desire

Smith (2018) attributes the recent emergence of the DILF to shifting cultures surrounding the sexualisation of the male body, which have normalised the objectification of men. Smith argues that, while this sexualisation largely arose in the 1990's and was originally associated with Chippendale dancers and gym culture, in recent years has 'shifted from the apparently unattached man to the man who has a young child' (p. 320). However, we posit a longer history of the sexualisation of male bodies, arising from greater focus on male bodies as a result of changing notions of masculinity and shifts in men's economic and domestic roles since the 18th century (e.g., Baron, 2006; Begiato, 2016). Male bodies have often been a site of the embodiment of masculinity and have conveyed messages of virility and strength, among other masculine attributes (Baron, 2006). What is new to modern culture is the explicitness with which male bodies are sexualised, as seen in the examples of Chippendale dancers and gym culture put forth by Smith (2018).

Further to the contemporary overt sexualisation of men is an emergent spotlight in popular discourse which emphasises female sexual expression and desire, positioning women as active sexual agents (e.g., Bay-Cheng, 2019). The coupling of female expression of sexual desire and cultural objectification of male bodies, alongside a cultural value placed on the avoidance of hegemonic masculinity, has allowed the DILF to come to the fore in recent years. While this contemporary milieu has been the backdrop for the emergence of the DILF as a cultural object of desire, fathers as private objects of desire have been discussed in psychological theorising for decades.

Freud's daddy issues and the role of the father-child relationship

Early psychoanalysis addressed sexual attraction to fathers in the context of the Oedipus complex (later known as the Electra complex). According to Freud, the essence of this complex is a fantasy on the part of the child to engage in sexual relations with their other-sex parent, resulting in hostility towards the same-sex parent (Freud, 1899/2013). Freud attributed several psychosexual abnormalities to this complex, including neuroses, hypersexuality, and infantile regression (Freud, 1899/2013, 1910). However, Freudian theory gives virtually no insight into female sexuality specifically and has been widely critiqued for its lack of empirical basis (e.g., Friedman & Downey, 1995; Kupfersmid, 1995; Morgenshtern, 2003). Despite rejection by the academic community, popular discourse often attributes women's attraction to older men to Freudian hypotheses or 'daddy issues' (e.g., Banks & Arnold, 2001), suggesting that the DILF phenomenon may be an expression of women's sexual desire for father figures who resemble their own. The psychoanalytic perspective would thus hold that women's own relationships with their fathers, as well as desire for a partner like their father, would explain interest in DILFs. We do not expect this pattern to hold given the dearth of empirical basis or support for psychoanalytic theory (Friedman & Downey, 1995; Kupfersmid, 1995; Morgenshtern, 2003). We suggest instead that the popular Freudian discourse on DILFs is but conjecture.

Further examination of the Freudian discourse reveals that even if an Oedipal complex does exist, it is likely mediated by social and/or biological constraints. In the late 1800s, Westermarck argued that incest taboo – a social sanction present in practically every human society – is the result of adaptive psychological mechanisms to prevent inbreeding (1891/Westermarck, 1921). Contemporary societies continue to hold strong taboos against incest (Wolf, 2014) and rates of incest between biological fathers and daughters are low, particularly among families with high paternal involvement in childhood (Williams & Finkelhor, 1995). By extension, sexual attraction to middle-aged fathers could be viewed from a psychoanalytic perspective as a form of either adaptive or conscious incest avoidance, by redirecting Oedipal urges away from one's own father to a father-like figure. In this way, the DILF could function as a biologically safer and socially acceptable outlet for expressing taboo incestual impulses. Again, while we take this Freudian hypothesis into consideration, it is noteworthy that this complex pattern of reattribution of the Oedipal complex is certainly not a parsimonious or empirically founded explanation of the DILF phenomenon.

While the tenets of Freudian theory are largely unfalsifiable, the present study provides a test of one contemporary popular manifestation of this theoretical perspective. We examine this possibility by examining whether women's own relationships with their fathers, as well as desire for a partner like their own father, explain interest in the DILF versus non-DILF target.

Darwin's DILFs

An evolutionary perspective also provides a useful, though limited framework for understanding the DILF phenomenon. Evolutionary logic – which is often narrowly heteronormative and reproductively focussed – indicates that the ideal situation for a woman is to have a long-term partner with reproductive potential who is willing to invest resources and energy into the partnership and the care of children (Buss, 1989; Geary et al., 2004; Trivers, 1972). Guided by an evolutionary perspective, it might be expected that women would be attracted to the DILF for his reproductive potential and resource provision capability. However, given the evolutionary perspectives' inherent ignorance of the social and cultural construction of mate preferences and women's roles as reproducers (e.g., McKinnon, 2005), we do not expect this pattern to hold.

Evolutionary logic offers that, because human males invest more in their offspring than do most species (Alexander & Noonan, 1979; Geary, 2015), women should seek to mate with males who have the means and willingness to provide this paternal investment, which improves reproductive

outcomes (Adler et al., 1994; Antfolk & Sjölund, 2018; Geary, 2000, 2015; Geary et al., 2004; Hurtado & Hill et al., 1992). Accordingly, women value attributes such as kindness, generosity, ambition, industriousness, confidence, social status, and earning capacity when selecting mates (Bech-Sørensen & Pollet, 2016; Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Hudson & Henze, 1969; Townsend, 1989). Because women place high value on resource provision capabilities in mates, older men tend to make better partners; older men have had more time to develop self-confidence, accrue resources, and gain social status (Andersson, 1994; Buss, 1989; Geary et al., 2004; Townsend & Wasserman, 1997). Women thus have an evolved preference for older partners (Bech-Sørensen & Pollet, 2016; Buss, 1989; Buunk et al., 2002; Geary et al., 2004; Silverthorne & Quinsey, 2000), which the DILF should fulfill for younger women. In fact, Alley (1993) found that heterosexual females, across cultures and age groups, perceived men aged 30–45 years (the DILF ‘sweet spot’) to be of the highest physical attractiveness compared to other age groups (see also Jankowiak et al., 1992). This older age range may also signal valuable characteristics such as longevity, maturity, prowess, judgement, and experience (Buss, 1989; Symons, 1979).

Further, men’s interest in children is also posited by evolutionary theory to be a factor in their perceived attractiveness as long-term mates (e.g., Brase, 2006; Roney et al., 2006). In one study, men seen interacting with children were rated as more attractive by women than men observed in many other situations, including helping elderly people (LaCerra, 1995). Seeing a man interact with children may provide cues as to his suitability for fathering, including his generosity, protectiveness, and general interest in children. The DILF seen interacting with his own children could thus be viewed as an indicator of high mate value and high paternal investment (so long as the interactions are positive); the DILF again finds himself very well suited to women’s evolved preferences.

Women also value fertility in mates, though to a lesser extent than do males (Buss, 1989; Jankowiak et al., 1992). The DILF has demonstrable evidence of his ability to procreate – his children. The presence of offspring proves that the DILF is fertile; the female need not make any assumptions of fertility based on physical cues, as the man does when choosing a female partner (e.g., Buss, 1989; Buunk et al., 2002). The DILF’s children, therefore, may add to his physical appeal; Smith (2018) also emphasises how the juxtaposition between the physical bulk of the DILF and the petiteness of his child serves to highlight his strength and musculature. The DILF thus seems well-suited to many of the evolved preferences that evolutionary theory supposes for women. There are, however, some important caveats to this seemingly linear evolutionary logic. For example, a woman would face a trade-off in choosing a DILF as a mate; she would likely be expending time and energy in engaging with raising his children – offspring genetically unrelated to her. As a result of his fatherhood status, her mate would also likely be investing less time and energy in her, the relationship, and her related or potential offspring. Thus, the appeal of the DILF might be limited to resource provision capacities, though these may also be limited by his necessary investments in his own children, who again are genetically unrelated to the woman in question.

To examine whether evolutionary logic is indeed key to understanding the DILF phenomenon, we examine whether women desire a short-term, casual sexual relationship with the DILF – as popular representations of the DILF’s sex appeal would suggest – or a long-term partnership, which would make sense in light of evolutionary arguments suggesting the DILF’s increased investment potential. We also examine whether women’s own desire for children impacts their interest in relationships with the DILF versus non-DILF target, as the evolutionary logic presented here suggests that women’s desire for reproduction should drive this interest.

Purposes of the present study

Given the prevalence of DILF-related content in mainstream Western media, the present study sought to provide an empirical basis for understanding this cultural phenomenon. Our aim was to explore the characteristics associated with fathers (DILFs) and non-fathers (non-DILFs), and to determine if fatherhood itself increases the perceived attractiveness of an individual man.

Accounting for the existing literature, we hypothesised that women would be more attracted to a DILF than an equivalent man without children. We also sought to explore the role of numerous individual variables in women's attraction to the DILF, including women's age and desire for children, and the tendency to respond to sexual activities and situations with negative-to-positive affect (i.e., erotophobia-erotophilia). We also included a measure of women's own relationships with their father in order to examine the popular suggestion that Freudian-esque 'daddy issues' underlie women's attraction to DILFs, and examined whether women desired a short-term, casual sexual relationship with the DILF – as popular representations of the DILF's sex appeal would suggest – or a long-term partnership, which would make sense in light of evolutionary arguments suggesting the DILF's increased investment potential. Finally, we sought to identify which specific characteristics of the DILF make him appealing to heterosexual women. Is it age, fatherhood, and/or Oedipal urges that make dads so sexy?

Methodology

Design

This study involved a single-factor (DILF or non-DILF condition) randomised, between-groups, experimental design.

Participants

The sample consisted of 671 female participants, ranging in age from 16 to 70 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.98$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.11$). Only women who self-identified as having sex exclusively with men were eligible to participate. Participants were recruited from the research participant pool of a large Canadian university, via snowball sampling through online platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), and with adverts posted within the local community.

Fisher's Exact tests indicated no significant differences in reported relationship status, $\chi^2 (5, N = 671) = 2.87, p = .743$, ethnicity, $\chi^2 (11, N = 671) = 8.72, p = .664$, highest level of completed education, $\chi^2 (5, N = 671) = 4.63, p = .465$, parental status, $\chi^2 (2, N = 671) = .452, p = .925$, or desire for future children, $\chi^2 (4, N = 463) = 3.98, p = .409$. Further, a one-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference in age for women in either the DILF ($M = 29.25$; $SD = 10.91$) or non-DILF conditions ($M = 28.70$; $SD = 9.26$), $F(1, 669) = .498, p = .481$. Detailed demographic information of participants by condition are found in [Table 1](#).

Further, two separate independent-samples ANOVAs determined whether father-daughter relationship quality and level of erotophobia-erotophilia differed in participants exposed to the DILF profile and non-DILF profile conditions. No significance difference was found in participant father-daughter relationship quality between the DILF ($M = 1.78$; $SD = .84$) and non-DILF ($M = 1.79$; $SD = .84$) conditions, $F(1, 669) = .006, p = .938$. Similarly, no difference was found on level of erotophobia-erotophilia in either the DILF ($M = 4.90$; $SD = 1.12$) or non-DILF ($M = 4.90$; $SD = 1.10$) conditions, $F(1, 669) = .000, p = .987$.

Materials & measures

Demographics

Participants were asked to respond to a seven-item questionnaire regarding their age, sexual orientation (to ascertain study eligibility), ethnicity, relationship status, highest level of completed education, whether they had any children or were currently pregnant, and their intent to have future children.

Table 1. Distribution of demographic characteristics by condition.

	DILF Condition <i>n</i> = 332	Non-DILF Condition <i>n</i> = 339
Age	<i>M</i> = 29.25 (<i>SD</i> = 10.91)	<i>M</i> = 28.70 (<i>SD</i> = 9.26)
Relationship Status		
Single	88 (26.5%)	84 (24.8%)
Casually dating	36 (10.8%)	50 (14.7%)
Non-married committed relationship	110 (33.1%)	107 (31.6%)
Married/civil union	91 (27.4%)	91 (26.8%)
Legally separated/divorced	5 (1.5%)	6 (1.8%)
Widowed	2 (0.6%)	1 (0.3%)
Ethnicity		
African/Black	12 (3.6%)	16 (4.7%)
Caucasian/White	224 (67.5%)	227 (67.0%)
East Asian	15 (4.5%)	6 (1.8%)
Eurasian/Central Asian	3 (0.9%)	3 (0.9%)
Hispanic/Latin American	15 (4.5%)	11 (3.2%)
Indigenous/Aboriginal	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.3%)
Middle Eastern	2 (0.6%)	2 (0.6%)
Pacific Islander	1 (0.3%)	3 (0.9%)
South Asian	39 (11.7%)	44 (13.0%)
Southeast Asian	7 (2.1%)	12 (3.5%)
Multiracial	11 (3.3%)	11 (3.2%)
Prefer not to say	3 (0.9%)	3 (0.9%)
Education		
Some high school	14 (4.2%)	8 (2.4%)
Completed high School	49 (14.8%)	47 (13.9%)
Some undergraduate	132 (39.8%)	124 (36.6%)
Completed undergraduate	88 (26.5%)	101 (29.8%)
Graduate school or above	39 (11.7%)	42 (12.4%)
Vocational degree/certificate	10 (3.0%)	17 (5.0%)
Parenthood		
Has children	103 (31.0%)	102 (30.1%)
No children	228 (68.7%)	235 (69.3%)
Currently pregnant	1 (0.3%)	2 (0.6%)
Want Children in the Future?		
Definitely not	18 (5.4%)	26 (7.7%)
Probably not	18 (5.4%)	21 (6.2%)
Might or might not	28 (8.4%)	23 (6.8%)
Probably yes	46 (13.9%)	58 (17.1%)
Definitely yes	118 (35.5%)	107 (31.6%)

Independent variable: target image

The target male was selected using the search term 'DILF' on Google and Instagram; upper body and head shot images of men who were clothed (i.e., men who were bare chested were excluded) and judged by researchers to be between 35–45 years of age, were compiled. A team of thirteen researchers blindly ranked the images in order of perceived attractiveness, and the highest ranked man was selected as the target male for both the DILF and non-DILF conditions. Our target male was an attractive Caucasian man with short brown hair and a light mustache/beard; he wore a hooded sweatshirt and jacket and posed against a blurred green background.¹ In addition to the image, participants were provided a brief profile of a middle-aged man, which consisted of one of the following descriptions:

- (1) 'This is Jason. He is a 45-year old employed, single dad with two children. You have recently been introduced to him by a mutual acquaintance.'
- (2) 'This is Jason. He is a 45-year old employed, single man with no children. You have recently been introduced to him by a mutual acquaintance.'

Positive attributes scale

Upon receiving the image and profile information, participants were directed to evaluate the target male on several characteristics. Developed specifically for the present study, this scale compiled 35

attribute assessments measuring characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity (e.g., power, strength, confidence, authority), with fatherhood (e.g., empathy, dependability, good with children), and with middle aged/older men (e.g., financial security, sexual experience, maturity). Participants responded to the question, 'to what degree do you think this man is/has/likes ...?' for each of the 35 attributes on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*very*), where higher scores indicated more positive characteristics attributed to the target. The totalled score produced very strong Cronbach's alphas of $\alpha = .93$ and $\alpha = .91$ for the DILF and non-DILF profile conditions, respectively.

Attraction to the target male

Seven questions evaluated participant attraction to the target male and preferences regarding both his age and parenthood status. First, using a Likert scale with responses ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*very*), participants reported the extent to which the target male was someone they would fantasise having sex with, would have sex with should the opportunity arise, and would engage with in a long-term romantic relationship. Scores across these questions were totalled, with higher scores indicating greater attraction to the target. Cronbach's alphas at $\alpha = .88$ for both the DILF and non-DILF conditions indicated strong internal consistency reliability on ratings of attraction. Further, the first two questions were subtotalled as an indication of interest in a short-term sexual relationship with the target ($r = .86$ and $r = .84$ for the DILF and non-DILF profile conditions), while the final question was used to indicate interest in a long-term romantic relationship with the target.

The next series of questions attempted to tease apart what age-related factors influenced participant perceptions of the target male's attractiveness. Participants were asked three yes or no questions: 'Would you view sex with this person as taboo or inappropriate due to his age?' (*sex with target male as taboo*), 'Would you find an older version of this man more attractive?' (*older preference in target age*), and 'Would you find a younger version of this man more attractive?' (*younger preference in target age*). To assess a potential age orientation, participants were also asked to indicate a preference for age difference with an ideal partner (i.e., younger than me, the same age as me, 1–4 years older, 5–10 years older, 10–15 years older, 15–25 years older, or over 25 years older; *preferred partner age*).²

Relationship to one's own father

To objectively address the 'daddy issues' stereotype and explore psychoanalytic explanations for the DILF phenomenon, information on participants' perceptions of their own fathers was collected. Using a Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*very much*) as the character evaluation, participants rated the extent to which their father was engaged in raising them, how much leisure time they spent with their father in childhood, how much emotional investment they received from their father in childhood, and to what extent they would like to find a partner like their own father (see Wiszewska et al., 2007). Scores were totalled, with higher scores indicating a more positive paternal relationship. Internal consistency ratings were strong, with alphas at .81 and .83 for the DILF and non-DILF conditions. Additionally, a separate question asked participants the extent to which the target profile reminded them of their own father, using the same 0–3 rating scale.

Sexual opinion survey (SOS; Fisher et al., 1988)

The SOS is a 21-item measure of erotophobia-erotophilia, or the tendency to respond to sexual activities and situations with negative-to-positive affect. Items assess responses to sexual stimuli including autosexual behaviour (e.g., 'Masturbation can be an exciting experience'), homosexuality (e.g., 'Thoughts that I may have homosexual tendencies does not worry me at all'), heterosexual behaviour (e.g., 'Engaging in sexual activity is arousing'), sexual fantasy (e.g., 'The thought of engaging in unusual sex practices is highly arousing'), and visual sexual stimuli (e.g., 'I think it would be very entertaining to watch erotica'). Participants respond on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*) where lower totalled scores indicate a negative (i.e., erotophobic) response to sexuality and higher totalled scores indicate a positive (i.e., erotophilic)

response to sexuality. A very strong Cronbach's alpha of .92 for the SOS was established in the current study.

Results

This study employed a series of between-groups (DILF versus non-DILF profile) statistics on the dependent variables of positive attributions, inclination to engage in a short-term or long-term relationship with the target, and age-related and paternal relationship influences. Moreover, a principal components analysis was employed to determine whether items on the 35-item Positive Attributes Scale could be reduced to subscale categories, further distinguishing the DILF and non-DILF profile conditions.

Difference between DILF and non-DILF conditions on positive attributes

A one-way analysis of variance evaluated whether women in the DILF profile condition rated the target male as possessing more positive attributes than women in the non-DILF profile condition. A statistically significant effect was found, $F(1, 669) = 17.48, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, with participants in the DILF profile condition rating the target male as having more positive attributes ($M = 2.18$; $SD = .38$) than women in the non-DILF ($M = 2.06$; $SD = .34$) profile condition.

A two-step statistical procedure was further utilised to determine which items on the attributes scale generated the differences observed between the DILF and non-DILF profile conditions. First, response patterns on the 35-item positive attributes scale were explored using a principal component analysis (PCA). The PCA was employed as a data reduction strategy to identify underlying components within the scale. Thirty-five positive attribute questions were entered in the PCA. We applied a direct oblimin rotation³ with eigenvalues set conservatively at 2, as it was expected that components would correlate. Three components were found that accounted for a total of 44% of the variance for the entire set of items. The three components were labelled masculine attributes (component 1), emotional attributes (component 2), and social attributes (component 3); these components had eigenvalues greater than 2 and explained 29%, 9%, and 6% of the total variance, respectively. Specific component factor loadings and communalities of the rotated solution are presented in Table 2. Computed Cronbach's alphas for each subscale indicated strong internal consistency reliability, with coefficients at .86, .86, .84 for the masculine, emotional, and social subscales in the DILF profile condition, and at .85, .87, .83 for the masculine, emotional, and social subscales in the non-DILF condition.

Given the presence of clear factors with strong internal consistency ratings, the three positive attribute subscales of (1) masculine attributes, (2) emotional attributes, and (3) social attributes were entered into a between-groups one-way multivariate analysis of variance. A statistically significant MANOVA was obtained, *Pillai's Trace* = .14, $F(3, 667) = 35.41, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$, indicating that women assessed the DILF profile condition differently than women in the non-DILF condition. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs revealed that results on two of the three subscales, social attributes, $F(1, 669) = 14.82, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .022$ and emotional attributes, $F(1, 669) = 6.91, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .056$ were significantly different between conditions. The masculine attributes component did not significantly differ between groups.

Descriptive statistics on attributes by profile condition are represented in Figure 1. Follow-up analyses using a Bonferroni corrected alpha of .01 determined that women in the non-DILF profile condition rated the target male as possessing more social attributes ($M = 2.18$; $SD = .48$) than the women in the DILF profile condition ($M = 2.03$; $SD = .49$). However, women in the DILF profile condition rated the target male as possessing more emotional attributes ($M = 2.29$; $SD = .43$) than women in the non-DILF profile condition ($M = 2.09$; $SD = .41$).

Table 2. Component loadings and communalities for positive attributes scale.

	Component		
	1	2	3
Dominant	.77		
In Charge	.76		
Authoritative	.75		
Powerful	.67		
Strong	.60		
Sexually Attractive	.57		
Handsome	.55		
Masculine	.52		
Sexually Experienced	.49		
Financially Secure	.43		
Rugged	.43		
Good with Children		-.78	
Good Father		-.78	
Long Term Relationship		-.73	
Empathic		-.71	
Dependable		-.65	
Selfless		-.64	
Responsible		-.63	
Nurturing		-.62	
Wise		-.45	
Mature		-.44	
Good Planner		-.43	
Capable		-.40	
Healthy		-.36	
Enjoys socialising			.76
Likes Travelling			.74
Spontaneous			.71
Fun			.68
Good Entertainer			.65
Active			.58
High Sex Drive			.53
Humorous			.47
Good Lover			.45
Confident			.34

Target's attractiveness between DILF and non-DILF conditions

A one-way ANOVA examined whether the target was rated equally attractive in both the DILF profile and non-DILF profile conditions. No difference was found on level of target attractiveness between the DILF ($M = 1.57$; $SD = .92$) and non-DILF ($M = 1.56$; $SD = .93$) conditions, $F(1, 669) = .03$, $p = .87$, indicating that the target male was rated equally attractive across conditions.

As an additional assessment of attraction to the target profile, a multivariate analysis of variance examined whether women reported more interested in having a long-term or short-term sexual relationship with the target profile in the DILF and non-DILF conditions. No significant effect of profile condition for engaging in a short-term sexual partnership or long-term romantic relationship partnership with the target male was found, *Pillai's Trace* = .01, $F(2, 668) = .16$, $p = .85$. Overall, the target male was equally attractive as both a short-term partner and a long-term partner for both profile conditions.

Age orientation between DILF and non-DILF conditions

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance examined whether age-related factors influenced participant perceptions of the target male's attractiveness (i.e., an age orientation) in the DILF and non-DILF conditions. A non-significant MANOVA was obtained, indicating no differences between the groups, *Pillai's Trace* = .01, $F(4, 666) = .77$, $p = .55$. Specifically, women in both profile conditions

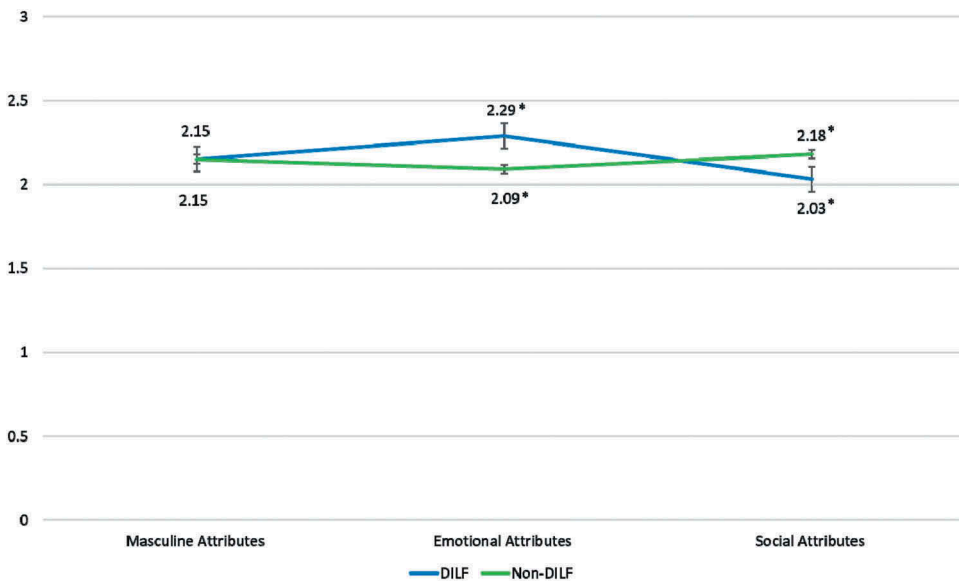


Figure 1. Descriptive statistics for positive attribute subscales organised by profile condition.

Note: Means with asterisks differ significantly at the $p < .001$. All positive attributes subscales range from 0 to 3. Higher scores indicate more positive attributes.

responded similarly on whether they viewed sex with the target male as being inappropriate due to his age, whether they would find an older or younger version of the target male as more attractive, and their preferred partner age range (see Table 3).

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to quantitatively examine the popular phenomenon of the ‘DILF’, or Dad I’d like to Fuck. Our main goal was to explore whether women perceived differences in the appeal of the DILF versus an equally appealing man without children. Indeed, the between-groups analysis conducted on our Positive Attributes Scale demonstrates that women evaluated our stimulus profile significantly more positively in the DILF condition than in the non-DILF condition, showing that the man with children (the DILF) was overall considered more appealing. Our results indicate that the appeal of the DILF lies primarily in the characteristics associated with his fatherhood status rather than his age or ability to act as a stand-in for Oedipal urges; more specifically, he was perceived to possess greater emotional skill than his non-DILF counterpart. These findings convey several possible implications regarding women’s sexual desire as well as the cultural conceptions of parenthood and hegemonic masculinity.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for age orientation by profile condition.

	Profile Condition			
	DILF $n = 332$		Non-DILF $n = 339$	
Preferences in Target Profile	Yes	No	Yes	No
Sex with target male as taboo?	108 (32.5%)	224 (67.5%)	101 (29.8%)	238 (70.2%)
Older preference in target age?	56 (16.9%)	276 (83.1%)	61 (18%)	278 (82%)
Younger preference in target age?	166 (50%)	166 (50%)	173 (51%)	166 (49%)
Preference in Partner	Mode		Mode	
Preferred Partner Age	3 (.93)		3 (.98)	

Preferred partner age ranged categorically from 1 to 7. Higher scores indicate a preference for an older partner: 1 = younger than me, 2 = the same age as me, 3 = 1–4 years older, 4 = 5–10 years older, 5 = 10–15 years older, 6 = 15–25 years older, and 7 = over 25 years older.

Unpacking desire

Although the terms 'DILF' and 'daddy' are sometimes used interchangeably in reference to mature men (Peregrin, 2012), the present study established that the status of the DILF as a father, rather than his age, was the key component of his heightened appeal to women. In accordance with previous research, participants reported that their ideal partner would be older than themselves (e.g., Buss, 1989; Buunk et al., 2002; Geary et al., 2004; Silverthorne & Quinsey, 2000), with the most commonly reported preference being a partner who was between one to four years senior. Most participants in both the DILF and non-DILF conditions indicated that they would not consider an older version of the target male to be more attractive, but approximately half of participants in each group thought they would find a younger version of the target more attractive. This represents a trend towards teleiophilic preferences (i.e., younger than 45) and implies fluidity in female attraction regarding age. Given that both our DILF and non-DILF targets were described as the same age, and the DILF was rated as having more positive attributes, we argue that fatherhood was the factor contributing to increased attraction. This parenthood-based partiality defies the conceptualisation of the DILF as an age-related preference, and suggests that age (and, particularly, middle age) may not be a necessary element of the DILF construct.

Furthermore, the Freudian construal of the DILF was determined to be lacking in utility. Women's ratings of their own experiences with their fathers, and attraction to men like their own fathers, were unrelated to their ratings of the male target. Given the inefficacy of this psychoanalytic perspective, the DILF does not appear to be a manifestation of the Oedipal complex, nor a socially acceptable stand-in for the father figure himself, as might be suggested by an incest-avoidance perspective.

These findings align with previous theoretical and popular works on the DILF phenomenon, which posit that the appeal of the sexualised father lies largely in his wisdom, empathy, and care, as demonstrated through his interactions with his children (DiDomizio, 2016; Lee & Lee, 2018; Smith, 2018). From an evolutionary perspective, possession of these emotional skills is highly desirable among men, indicating high mate value and willingness to provide investment to offspring (Brase, 2006; Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Hudson & Henze, 1969; Roney et al., 2006; Townsend, 1989). As such, our findings provide general support to the evolutionary hypothesis; the observed appeal of emotional skills associated with fatherhood status suggests that women's preference for DILFs may reflect evolved mate selection preferences regarding parental investment.

However, it is important to note that women's sexual attraction to DILFs may or may not be reproductively driven; although women's attraction to fathers is indeed logical from an evolutionary perspective, such attraction could also reflect unrelated individual desires, though our findings suggest no differences between groups in reported desire for children, for instance. Women in the DILF and non-DILF conditions also reported equal desire to engage in both a short-term sexual relationship and a long-term romantic relationship with the target male, suggesting that DILFs and non-DILFs are equally attractive as both short-term and long-term partners; this would be counter-intuitive if the primary appeal of a DILF was his potential as a long-term mate or provider for one's offspring.

DILFs were also perceived as having less social opportunity than non-DILFs. Given the time constraints and responsibilities associated with parenthood, and particularly single parenthood, it seems a logical conclusion that a man with children would have fewer social opportunities than a man without children. Whether a DILF who is partnered is similarly perceived to lack social opportunities is unclear; it is possible, for instance, that individuals might perceive a married man to have more social opportunities via his partner. Nonetheless, the lack of social opportunities did not appear to deter women from desiring a relationship with the DILF. As noted, women in the DILF and non-DILF conditions reported equal desire to engage in both a short-term sexual relationship and a long-term romantic relationship with the target male, suggesting that DILFs and non-DILFs are equally attractive as both short-term and long-term partners.

With regard to forming long-term partnerships, our results were trending in the direction of favouring DILFs over non-DILFs, indicating that women may value emotional skills – the main favourable attribute of the DILF – over social opportunities (in which the DILF was relatively lacking) in a long-term partner. This aligns with previous research positing that emotional availability and parenting proclivities are essential to male mate value (e.g., Buss & Shackelford, 2008; Waynforth, 2001), while social opportunities tend to be valued less highly, even when considered as opportunities to become culturally successful (Buss, 1989).

Parenthood and patriarchy

Over time, masculinities evolve. In particular, the degree to which aspects of the fatherhood role are valued or encouraged appears to be changing. As discussed previously, the hybridisation of fatherhood that occurred in the latter portion of the twentieth century involved an expansion of nurturance and emotional bonding – traditionally regarded as more feminized aspects of parenthood – in the contemporary construct of idealised manhood (Randles, 2018; Smith, 2018). While these elements are not new to the paternal role, they represent a shift in emphasis compared to historical constructs of masculinity, which focused on a father's obligations as provider, educator, and disciplinarian (Bailey, 2010, 2014; Strange, 2012). In the Victorian era, for instance, fatherly affection was primarily demonstrated through pragmatic care – economic provision and labour (including domestic labour) (e.g., Strange, 2012), as well as teaching sons how to be good, honourable men (Bailey, 2014). In more modern constructs of masculinity, men are encouraged to take a more active parental role, and engage in more emotional expression (Randles, 2018; Smith, 2018). The results of the present study suggest that this new interpretation of fatherhood has been largely accepted – as well as sexualised – in our broader cultural discourse on masculinity and desirability.

Of interest, DILFs and non-DILFs were rated as equally masculine. Given that children are an obvious indication of a man's fertility – which is strongly and popularly associated with virility and masculinity (Hanna & Gough, 2015; Throsby & Gill, 2004) – it is interesting that the presence of offspring did not influence women's masculinity judgements. Ratings on our emotional skills subscale suggest that DILFs possess a more 'domesticated' masculinity (Gavanas, 2004; Smith, 2018) relative to non-DILFs, participating in more roles traditionally relegated to motherhood. Our findings suggest that the adoption of these traditionally feminine roles does not detract from one's perceived masculinity and may in fact increase one's appeal to women. This is perhaps an encouraging finding for those who do not meet more traditional masculine norms, and those who may fear emasculation due to emotional expression.

Indeed, modern cultural reconstructions of masculine ideals may have many positive benefits. Although patriarchy is most frequently discussed in relation to women's oppression, traditional gendered norms also inflict significant psychological, physical, and social harm on men. Countries with greater gender inequality report higher rates of male mortality (Stanistreet et al., 2005), and gender role conflict arising from nonconformity to masculine ideals has consistently been associated with poor outcomes among men (Kaya et al., 2019; O'Neil, 2008; Robertson & Monaghan, 2012). For instance, men who report greater endorsement of traditional masculine ideologies display higher alcohol consumption and more problematic drinking (Monk & Ricciardelli, 2003; Uy et al., 2014). Masculine norms of restricted emotionality have also been implicated in the underreporting of men's mental health issues and high rates of male suicide (Cleary, 2012; Robertson & Monaghan, 2012). Dismantling forms of toxic masculinity and encouraging greater emotionality in men may therefore have positive implications for men's overall wellbeing.

However, scholars such as Bridges and Pascoe (2014) warn that such shifts in hegemonic masculinity only serve to disguise, rather than dismantle, cultural power structures. Social and cultural boundaries between groups may become blurred when masculinity constructs subsume qualities of subordinated groups (i.e., women, gay men, or less traditionally masculine men), but this does not challenge inequality directly (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Randles, 2018). In other words, co-opting aspects of marginalised groups allows men to distance themselves from their privilege but does not actually decrease it.

The DILF phenomenon seems to be a perfect example of this paradox; while the cultural appreciation of DILFs evidently denounces the traditional stoic father associated with hegemonic masculinity, it simultaneously reinforces gendered inequalities of parenthood by situating the father as 'different' or special. Smith (2018) observes that fatherhood is often treated as 'exceptional' in popular culture, with magazine coverage of male celebrities frequently referencing fatherhood status or displaying photographs of men with their children. Such coverage provides an opportunity to highlight both the tender elements of 'new' masculinity as well as the physical appeal of the male body seen flexing (Smith, 2018). In this way, nurturance is paired with traditional demonstrations of masculinity such as physical strength or musculature to create an object of sexual desire.

This represents a shift in the fatherhood construct that both embraces and depreciates motherhood; though certain feminine qualities are incorporated into the fatherhood ideal, the role of father retains its privileged position. For example, the gendered divide in parenthood can be upheld when fathers display nurturance – a non-traditional aspect of hegemonic masculinity – in relation to traditionally masculine forms, such as athleticism (Doucet, 2006; Randles, 2018). Furthermore, discourse emphasising the importance of a strong, involved father figure in children's lives indirectly suggests that the role of father is a unique one for which mothers are not adequate stand-ins (Randles, 2018). In other words, cultural ideas about 'daddy issues' or 'absentee fathers' imply that fathers are, to some extent, uniquely responsible for shaping the lives of their children in a way that mothers are not. Similarly, the sexual objectification of the DILF places a higher valuation on fatherhood status by implying the existence of an inherent sexual appeal not present in mothers; though mothers *can* be sexy, motherhood itself does not make them so. If, as our findings suggest, the appeal of the DILF lies primarily in his status at a father, it seems that cultural DILF-appreciation functions as a method for transforming hegemonic masculinity while maintaining the structural inequalities of gendered parenthood.

Limitations & future directions

Our data was collected from a sample limited to women who have sex with men only. Thus, the data may not be generalisable to broader populations. Future research on DILFs should aim to include a more diverse sample, particularly with regards to the inclusion of bisexual women and other women who have sex with men. Future researchers should also examine differences between the heterosexual and queer communities' normative understandings of the relevant terminology (e.g., does 'daddy' necessarily mean one has children, rather than simply being descriptive of a certain age group?), as well as differences in attraction to these men (e.g., are reproductive/parenting-related motivations a factor in the gay daddy phenomenon?).

At present, it is difficult to differentiate the types of content or attraction associated with varying conceptualisations of the 'daddy', since the search term yields results pertaining to older men, fathers, and incest-themed porn, as well as gay-male porn. This could mean that the assumed prevalence of DILF-appreciation, specifically, is lower than previously believed.

However, it is worth noting that women are 96% more likely than men to watch 'dad/daddy' porn, and interestingly, stepfather/daughter is the most popular theme in this category (Pornhub Insights, 2016). It is possible that these types of porn are appealing because the actors portrayed are assumed to be DILFs; older men, for instance, might be assumed to be fathers based on stereotypical norms or gender scripts, and therefore possess the attributes women find appealing. The popularity of stepfather/daughter porn could also be explained by the explicit portrayal of a father-like figure, attractive because of his fatherhood status. Further analysis is needed to determine whether the features that attract women to the DILF influence the sexual content they engage with.

The present study may have been limited by the attractiveness of the target male; that is, women's attractiveness ratings of the man across both the DILF and non-DILF categories were sufficiently high to suspect the possibility of a ceiling effect. Taking this into account, future researchers should validate the attractiveness of their images with a pilot study. Further, future

investigations should aim to include a broader range of attributes of the target DILF; the present study included only one target DILF who was Caucasian, aged 45, and had two children. Future researchers should include targets of a variety of ethnicities, ages, and body types to establish a broader understanding of the DILF phenomenon. Given the lack of a standard definition of the DILF, we established the age of the male target in the current investigation at 45 years; we hoped to capture the concept of middle-aged parent to make sure he was significantly older than our average participant (in this case, $M = 28.98$ years), thus allowing us to capture the effects of both parenthood and age discrepancy. However, given that parenthood can occur at many stages of life, and that in this study, parenthood – rather than age – was determined to be significantly related to women's positive ratings of the target male, future researchers should investigate the effect of varying the age of the DILF target. Thus, our findings are specific to one type of DILF; a single, Caucasian, middle-aged, employed father of two. Our findings cannot speak to the multitude of other representations of sexualised fatherhood. Lastly, provided that the experimental conditions were based on one target solely, it is difficult to determine whether the results were stimuli-driven or phenomenon-driven. Future studies may want to consider using participants and targets as random factors in statistical tests to reduce inferential and type one errors.

The DILF target in the present study was also described as having two children; future researchers should vary the number of children to examine any possible effects. It is possible that women may be more attracted to a man with only one child, as he may be assumed to have greater resources to share with a partner and to want more children in the future. It is also possible that women may be attracted to a man with more children, as this may provide tangible proof of his virility. Further, the age of the man's child(ren) may also impact female's judgements; women may view younger children as more demanding of parental attention while older children may be viewed as requiring less investment. Therefore, the heightened parental demands with raising younger children elicit more nurturing, emotional, and hands-on domestication behaviour from fathers – characteristics bounded with DILF status as the sexualised parental figure. Research varying the DILF's age and the number and ages of his children could provide insight into the nature of attraction to fathers, and greater clarity in reference to evolutionary theory.

Given that the DILF was rated higher on positive attributes, it is surprising that women did not report significantly greater desire to engage in a romantic relationship with the DILF than the non-DILF. It is possible that this was a result of circumstance; that is, women may be attracted to the man himself, but not to the circumstances surrounding him and his status as a father, potentially including custody battles, interactions with ex-partners, and other challenges faced by single dads. A woman's attraction to DILFs could also vary dependent on the stage of life she is in, and her priorities regarding time investment, and economic provisions. It is also possible that this finding may be rooted in the potential ceiling effect described earlier. As such, the present findings may not adequately reflect how women will respond to DILFs in real-world situations; we have established a cultural attraction to DILFs, but not whether women actually seek out partnerships with them.

Finally, the salience of the manipulation between conditions should be examined. In the present study, the same picture was presented in both conditions, and only the written description accompanying the image differed. Depicting the DILF with children in the photograph may provide a more salient manipulation; future researchers may also consider depicting the DILF engaged in some form of interaction with his children, as women tend to be more attracted to men seen interacting with children (e.g., Guéguen, 2014; LaCerra, 1995). Despite these limitations, the results of the present study provide an unprecedented empirical first-step in understanding the DILF phenomenon, which, although prevalent in popular culture, has been paid scant attention in the academic literature.

Conclusions

This study was, to our knowledge, the first quantitative examination of the popular cultural phenomenon of the DILF. Our results indicated that women attributed greater positive attributes to

DILFs than non-DILFs, and that DILFs were rated as particularly emotionally capable when compared to otherwise equivalent men without children. DILFs were, however, rated as having lower social opportunity than non-DILFs; there were no differences in ratings of masculinity. Although DILFs were perceived as more appealing overall, there were no differences between conditions regarding desire to engage in a short-term or long-term relationship with the target male. The results of the present study serve to empirically validate the DILF phenomenon, and simultaneously demonstrate the need for further critical attention in this area. These findings pose interesting questions regarding modern conceptions of masculinity and fatherhood, and how the sexual objectification of fatherhood status may perpetuate patriarchal structures.

Notes

1. Given the lack of research on the DILF phenomenon, we opted to restrict our examination to one male target in order to simplify the interpretation of results in this novel exploratory study. Future research should include more diverse male targets in future studies with a variety of ethnicities, ages, body types, and clothing styles to establish a broader understanding of the DILF phenomenon.
2. Although the age questions are difficult to interpret among participants who are older than the target male, it should be noted that the majority (91%) of our sample was below the age of 45 (our target male).
3. 'Rotation serves to make the output more understandable and is usually necessary to facilitate the interpretation of factors' (Garson, 2018, p. 17). Specifically, direct oblimin is a rotation technique used in factor analysis (FA) which allows for components to be related with one another (see Field, 2013; Garson, 2018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Flora Oswald graduated from the University of the Fraser Valley in 2018 with an honours degree in Psychology and a minor in Sociology. She received the prestigious Governor General's Silver Medal for the highest academic standing of her graduating year. Flora also received the Psychology book prize, an award granted to an outstanding graduate from the Psychology department, as well as the Social, Cultural, and Media Studies Outstanding Achievement Award. Flora's research interests relate primarily to sexual orientation, sexual health, and sexual and gender stereotyping. Flora is currently completing a dual title Ph.D. in the departments of Psychology and Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies at Pennsylvania State University.

Shelby Hughes graduated from Kwantlen Polytechnic University in 2017 with a BA in Psychology and a Certificate in NGO/Nonprofit Studies. She received the prestigious Dean's Medal Award as well as the Governor General's Silver Academic Medal for the highest academic standing in her graduating year. Shelby is beginning an MA program in Speech/Language Pathology at the University of Alberta in September 2020.

Amanda Champion graduated from the Bachelor of Arts in Psychology Honours program at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (with distinction) in 2014. She showcased her honours thesis at the Association for Psychological Science Convention in San Francisco in May of 2014 and was the recipient of the 2014 Canadian Psychological Association certificate of Academic Excellence. Amanda is beginning her Ph.D. in Criminology at Simon Fraser University in September of 2020.

Cory Pedersen earned her Ph.D. from the University of British Columbia in 2004 and has worked in the Department of Psychology at Kwantlen Polytechnic University since 2005. In 2011, Cory founded the Observations and Research in Gender and Sexuality Matters Lab to further her interests in human sexuality, providing students an opportunity to gain valuable research experience. Since its inception, several collaborative projects with the lab have been presented at psychology and sexology conferences, and in publication.

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