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Love at First Profile: An Experiment Exploring if Previously Incarcerated Individuals are Less Desirable While Online Dating

Carina Perrone

Thesis submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in Sociology

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ABSTRACT

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Carina Perrone

Incarceration is a rapidly increasing occurrence in the United States with more than 1.4 million people incarcerated and more than 2 million on some form of restricted confinement. While men are incarcerated at a much higher rate than women, women are still at a steady incline of incarceration as well. Also, people of color disproportionately make up a large number of those incarcerated while accounting for a small percentage of the general population. Previous research on people who have been incarcerated focuses on it affects education, employment, and marriage. Little research has attempted to explore how incarceration effects dating, a normal occurrence in the life course. In order to expand on existing research, this study utilizes experimental vignettes that manipulate the race, gender, and incarceration history of mock online dating profiles. Respondents were asked their attraction and relationship desirability toward the profile partner as well as other criminal justice related questions. Results found that an incarceration status does in fact cause lower rates in attraction and relationship desirability for both men and women respondents, albeit in different ways.

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country in the world. According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report (2020), there were approximately 2.17 million people in jail and prison combined by the end of 2019. However, incarceration is not uniformly distributed across the U.S. population. African Americans, Latinx, and other persons of color constitute the majority of prison inmates in the U.S. African Americans, who account for only 13% of the general population, are disproportionally incarcerated and constitute roughly 38.6% of individuals housed in state and federal prisons (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2021).

Incarceration also disproportionately affects young people. A recent report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2020) found that the bulk of inmates currently incarcerated are between 22 and 35 years old. In fact, the age at which young people have the greatest risk of incarceration corresponds with the age range researchers describe as "prime dating years" (Bureau of Census Statistics 2021; Allison 2019). Because most incarcerees are young and because most young inmates are incarcerated fewer than 10 years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021), it is important to consider how incarceration affects young people's dating prospects.

Researchers have documented the life course consequences of incarceration for both men and women. This body of work shows that incarcerees are less likely to marry, more likely to be divorced, and more likely to cohabitate than marry when compared to individuals who have not been incarcerated (Bosick and Gover 2010; London and Parker 2009; Wilson 1987). On the contrary, Sampson, Laub, and Wimer (2006) found that marriage plays a huge role in desistance from crime. Despite the marriage quality or criminal involvement of the partner, marriage during young adult years helps impede crime (Sampson et al. 2006). Extant research also highlights the detrimental impact of incarceration on employment, which has been shown to

be a factor linking incarceration to negative family outcomes among men such as divorce and lack of financial security for the family (Wilson 1987). Wilson (1987) uses the term *marriageability*, which is the ratio of employed men to all women of the same age, to understand low marriage rates among Black men and women. He also uses the term to highlight the connection between Black women-headed families and poor economic opportunities among Black men. The lack of marriageable men due to incarceration has forced women to take on the head of the house role. Although, incarceration has lowered marriageability, particularly among African American men, little research has extensively explored whether or not incarceration has the same effect on dating. Research on incarceration and marriage suggests that the stigma of incarceration repels potential marriage partners (Bosick and Gover 2010; London and Parker 2009; Wilson 1987). While the bar for marriage partners is high, the bar might be lower when surveying potential dating partners since dating is not always attached to the goal of marriage, and long-term non-marital unions have become more common and accepted in recent decades (Sassler and Miller 2017). As such, it might be incorrect to assume that incarceration locks men and women out of the dating market in the same way that it locks them out of the marriage market.

Dating, the development of intimate relationships, is an important part of the life course. It fills a number of roles, including a basic human need for intimacy and companionship (Birnie-Porter and Hunt 2015). People who are dating are no longer worried about ‘finding the one’ and are able to build a consistent relationship with one another and form a sense of attachment (Birnie-Porter and Hunt 2015). Dating between the ages 22 and 35 years old is both a personal and societal expectation and the stage of the life course for developing serious relationships. Dating is also an ego booster because it empowers people to feel wanted by others and is

something to look forward to. Dating might serve an important role for people who have been disconnected from society for a period of time and for those who have limited marriage prospects. Specifically, incarcerated people may find dating more important because it gives them a chance to get to know someone without having to initially disclose their criminal history. They might be especially interested in dating because they may have been incarcerated at a time when they would have been dating.

The current study seeks to explore the extent to which incarceration affects men's and women's dating desirability since mixed results are shown when it comes to marriage. I also examine how this effect is modified by incarceree race. Respondents are presented with a dating profile and asked to complete questions regarding perceptions of crime as well as their desirability to date the person represented in the profile. This study will not only fill a gap in the literature by presenting a normal occurrence in life (e.g., dating) among recently released inmates from prison, but will also explore the extent to which dating might be considered yet another casualty of mass incarceration by utilizing an in-depth questionnaire regarding desirability based on the profile. Furthermore, by using online dating as a way to explore dating preferences, dating websites may find this research useful by informing them of the desirability or undesirability of former inmates and convicted individuals, which could impact their policies and practices regarding user eligibility. As dating websites for meeting and writing prisoners become increasingly popular, mainstream dating websites may seek to be more inclusive of individuals who have a criminal background.

BACKGROUND

Incarceration and the Life Course

The life course perspective focuses on life milestones and the timing and sequencing of life events such as birth, education, marriage, and childbearing. Incarceration has become a significant and expected event in the life course of Black and Latinx persons in the U.S. (Western and Pettit 2010). Furthermore, Western and Pettit (2010) found that incarceration rates are highest for those who are in their twenties and early thirties, which are key years in the life course. For example, during these ages, most people are establishing a pathway through adulthood by leaving school, getting a job, and starting a family. Early adulthood is a critical time in a man's life. The skills and experiences he gains in early adulthood set the stage for supporting a partner and children and structures his life course trajectory. (Western and Pettit 2010). As such, life course theory is an important framework for understanding how incarceration might affect men's and women's dating prospects.

Life course theory emerged in the 1970s as a challenge by various researchers from different disciplines to the ideas undergirding commonly held assumptions about human life and individual behavior at the time (Roy 2014). The questions being asked in academic arenas during this time were as follows: How do individuals change as the world around them changes? How do major social events affect their world? How do they cope with the changes due to social events? In other words, life course theory sought to address the extent to which society gives social and personal meaning to the passing of our biological stages (birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age).

Elder (1975) theorized that the life course is based on five key principles: life span development, human agency, historical time and geographic place, timing of decisions, and

linked lives. *Life span development* can be utilized when exploring dating and incarceration. For example, one's early life decisions or opportunities affect later outcomes. As explained earlier, being incarcerated can delay one's dating life. Similarly, *human agency* believes that individuals are active in making decisions and setting goals, but the ability to do so depends on opportunities or constraints. While dating is typical and socially expected for persons aged 25 to 30 years, even if an incarcerated individual wanted to date they would be unable to do so while in prison.

Historical time and geographic place can also help explain the link between incarceration and dating. For example, we are living in a time where large proportions of urban, undereducated, Black and Brown persons are being incarcerated. Therefore, we see the choices made by policy makers and big movements like "Get Tough on Crime" in combination with an urban setting that are causing more people to be incarcerated (Clear 2007). Some life experiences can derail one's life course from the traditional path of education, marriage, and childbearing. Thus, the *timing of decisions* can be viewed as more age appropriate while others violate normative social timing by occurring too early or too late. The literature has explored unwed birth, teen pregnancy, not completing high school, and incarceration as a few examples of occurrences that interfere with the traditional life course trajectory. Typically, after the age of 35 people tend to settle down with one serious partner (Sciortino 2017). However, for former inmates, many may only be able to begin looking for a serious partner at this later age thereby affecting the timing of many other life course occurrences such as marriage or starting a family.

Further, *linked lives* tie into women not wanting to take on the criminal status of their partner. Elder (1975) discussed how lives are lived interdependently and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships. In other words, not only is incarceration stigmatizing for the offender but the family as well. Thus, there is an increased

likelihood that negative perceptions will be made about someone who is in a relationship with a previously incarcerated person due to the interdependence that relationships entail (Harner 2004).

Much of the life course literature focuses on marriage as a key social event that factors into the life course. A criminal encounter, which is a derailment from the traditional life course path, obviously disturbs the process of marriage especially if the person is sent to prison during typical marriage years. However, dating and forming serious relationships with others is an important occurrence that may or may not lead to marriage. In fact, research has shown that cohabitating and dating are on the increase while marriage is on the decline (Cherlin 2004) Therefore, dating has become the new and essential part of life that most, if not all, people experience instead of marriage.

Dating and the Life Course

Dating is conceptualized as a stage in a romantic union where two individuals meet socially and assess whether the other is suitable for a romantic relationship. Prior generations used dating as a way to screen potential marriage partners. This is not always the case today as non-marital relationships have become more common and accepted. Recent cohorts have experienced declines in marriage and increases in cohabitation (Sassler and Miller 2017). Also, having children out of wedlock has become increasingly common for younger cohorts of Americans regardless of income and racial/ethnic background (Jones 2015). Having a child together does not automatically propel couples to marriage nor does it guarantee the couple will stay together. But, according to Edin and Kefalas (2005), when surveying just after a child's birth, eight in ten unmarried parents are still in a romantic relationship and most plan to raise their child together.

The reasons for entering into a relationship, desires and wants in a partner, and relationship preference vary differently across the span of the life course. For example, younger people may be more interested in hook-up culture, which accepts and encourages casual sex encounters, including one-night stands and other related activity, without the expectation of future commitment or interaction with the hook-up partner (Sutton and Simmons 2014). Relationship preferences and qualities wanted in a partner change with age. For example, Goldscheider, Kaufman and Sassler (2009) found that adults who are parents or previously married are more tolerant of prospective mates who are divorced or have children. Therefore, it is clear to see that relationship formation and all that it entails changes as one progresses through life course.

Incarceration and Dating

Little research has explored how dating is impacted when incarceration is involved. Much of the research behind the effects of incarceration focuses on marriage, family, and employment and show a pattern of negative effects from criminality on life outcomes. These patterns include stigma associated with a criminal conviction, lack of experience whether it be education or career due to being incarcerated, and the financial hardship incarceration creates. For example, Western and Pettit (2010) found the following regarding how previously incarcerated people continue to be at a disadvantage upon release. First, ex-inmates may develop habits or behaviors that are not appropriate for the workplace environment or routine due to the conditions while being incarcerated. Also, since ex-inmates have spent some time in prison that means less time in the workforce, which diminishes their work experience in comparison to those who were not in prison.

Pager's (2003) research further confirms that the stigma associated with having a criminal conviction negatively affects employment opportunities. Using an experimental approach, Pager (2003) recruited fake job seekers which included four men, two Black and two White, that were 23-year-old college students from Milwaukee and were matched on the basis of physical appearance as well as general style of self-presentation. The participants were provided with resumes that displayed the same educational attainment and work experience. However, one man from each race category was randomly assigned to a resume that indicated a criminal conviction (i.e., using a parole officer as a reference and a check in the "criminal record" box on the job application). Results show that ex-offenders are only one-half to one-third as likely as nonoffenders to be considered by employers, demonstrating that a criminal record is a significant barrier to employment. Difficulty finding employment is undoubtedly consequential for the individual but could also have a detrimental effect on an individual's loved ones and future relationship partners as well. It may be extremely troublesome to potential daters to start a relationship with an ex-criminal knowing the financial barriers and lack of employment opportunities they face.

Stewart and Uggen (2019) found similar results almost two decades later while examining college admissions. Consistent with the negative employment outcomes for those with a criminal record, more recent research has found the rejection rate for college applicants with felony convictions was nearly 2.5 times the rate of their non-criminal counterparts (Stewart and Uggen 2019). However, the racial differences in admission decisions for college appeared to be smaller in comparison to employment outlooks. Despite a smaller racial difference, Black applicants who had a criminal record were particularly penalized when disclosing a felony record at colleges that had reportedly high crime rates on campus (Stewart and Uggen 2019). No matter

how small, there still seems to be racial inconsistencies for those that disclose a criminal record for both employment and college admissions. Again, it may be extremely troublesome to potential daters to start a relationship with a person who has a criminal record knowing the financial barriers, lack of college opportunity and lack of employment opportunities they face.

Not only do women not want to take on the label associated with criminals, but women also do not want to date a person who is unable to obtain a stable job, which creates further financial burdens. For example, Washington and Woldoff (2021) found that marriage decisions are dependent on fathers' abilities to secure employment. Also, the type of employment for the father matters more so than the amount of income that fathers earn (Washington and Woldoff 2021). Therefore, the lack of employment and quality of job due to a criminal history may have an indirect effect on their dating chances.

Pager (2003) also found a racial component attached to the willingness to hire former incarcerees. Whites with a criminal background were more likely to be hired than Blacks with no criminal background (Pager 2003). Furthermore, Ban the Box (BTB) policies have been implemented to restrict potential employers from asking applicants for criminal histories. These efforts were put into place to help reduce unemployment among Black men, who disproportionately have criminal records (Agan and Starr 2017). By sending out roughly 15,000 online applications that varied on distinctly Black names or White names and felony conviction status, Agan and Starr (2017) wanted to assess callbacks both before and after BTB initiatives. Their results found that discrimination by employers substantially increased based on race after the BTB went into effect. In other words, criminality is assumed for Black job applicants unless the box for no criminal record has been checked. Therefore, without the box, employers assume minoritized individuals are criminals.

A criminal record might be perceived differently based on race when searching for dating partners as well. For example, Bany et al. (2014) found that Black men are far more likely to out-marry in comparison to Black women. Whites were far more likely than Asians and Latinos to reject Black women as possible dates due to not finding Blacks particularly attractive physically (Bany, et al. 2014). Lastly, the researchers found that White men as well as Latinos were more likely to exclude Black women due to perceptions of decreased femininity, such as being loud, aggressive and talkative, a lack of moral values, and overall low levels of physical attractiveness as compared to women from other race/ethnic groups (Bany, Robnett, and Feliciano 2014). A criminal record may exacerbate these negative stereotypes and decrease the frequency with which Black women date.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to determine if incarceration has a negative effect on dating. More specifically, the current study utilizes replicas of online dating profiles to test whether those previously incarcerated are deemed more undesirable in comparison to their identical but nonincarcerated counterparts. There is a stigma associated with being incarcerated in society which has been shown to negatively affect already limited job opportunities, education, parenting and marriageability. Therefore, is forming social and intimate relationships yet another area that the previously incarcerated are at a disadvantage in?

The literature on incarceration focuses heavily on men and does not provide much information on the current outcomes for women who are incarcerated. Since previous literature relies so heavily on men, the current study utilizes both men and women in order to gain a better understanding of whether gender has an effect on dating when it is attached to an incarcerated background. Also, previous research found that race not only influences incarceration but dating

as well. For example, Blacks and Latinos are more likely to be incarcerated (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2021). Additionally in a relationship sense, Whites and Asians are not willing to date Blacks, while Blacks are resistant to dating Whites (Tsunokai et al. 2009). Furthermore, Asians typically prefer dating Whites (Tsunokai et al. 2009). Based on the racial components included in the literature, the current study uses both Black men and women as well as White men and women profiles. Overall, the objective of the current study is to use an extremely common part of life to determine whether or not incarcerated people are at a disadvantage when it comes to dating. By using a gender component, the current study is able to bridge a gap in the incarceration data that typically focuses only on outcomes for men. Also, using a racial component allows the current study to include whether or not race plays a role into dating especially when one has been incarcerated because research shows there is a racial component to incarceration.

The Surge in Online Dating

There have been recent shifts in the way in which people meet potential dating partners. A study conducted by Harvard University (2017) found that around 39% of heterosexual couples surveyed met their significant other online and 27% in a bar or restaurant. Also, in 2017, only 7% found their significant other through family and 5% in school. The researchers compared this to 1995 when 33% of heterosexual couples met their significant other through friends and 19% of them through work. Also, in 1995, only 9% of couples met during college and 2% met online. Thus, there have been major shifts in the ways in which people meet one another in the last several decades. The United States Census Bureau confirmed that around 46% of single people use online dating for one or more of the following purposes: companionship, dating, marriage, or childbearing (Gelles, 2011). Further, around 11% of American adults have tried online dating at

least once (Smith and Duggan, 2013). The Internet has extensively expanded its capabilities. Dating websites and applications have matching techniques and algorithms that will connect individuals based on numerous factors that cater to their preferences.

Online dating has several purported advantages over traditional, in-person dating including it is popular; it is global; it is affordable, and it is convenient. Today, more than 5,000 online dating services are offered in the United States and more than 30.4 million adults ages 18-49 report having an online dating profile (Zwilling 2013). Throughout the world, many more websites exist, which gives singles more options for potential daters than ever before. Online dating has become a more efficient way for people to find a partner with whom to create a bond as it can be done from the comfort of one's home. Online dating is also affordable. In-person dating can require people to spend money on each date as potential dating partners are likely to meet in public places like coffee shops, restaurants, and movie theaters. As such, in-person dating can become a costly occurrence and can be cost prohibitive for people who do not have a stable stream of income or money to spare. Online dating is cost efficient because people can meet a large number of potential partners for little to no cost. Finally, online dating is easy and convenient. Aside from some websites whose matching algorithms are performed based on lengthy questionnaires, most online dating platforms allow users to set up a profile quickly. Today, and especially during the global COVID-19 pandemic, people have turned increasingly to online dating to find romantic partners (Goldstein and Flicker 2020).

As mentioned earlier, online dating resources are not all the same, but for the most part, people set up a profile where they can share a photo and report their age, location, height, weight, interests, hobbies, education, career, and other personal information. Once the profile is set up, the website may then ask questions about the qualities sought in a mate. For example,

they may ask what gender you are interested in, what age range you are looking for, how close in proximity you would like the other person to be, and many other factors catered to their own liking. After the user's profile and dating criteria are established, the profile is immediately shared on the website and made available to potential mates. The process from start to finish can take less than an hour before new online daters can begin to review and reach out to potential partners. While every dating website varies slightly with regard to how potential daters are contacted, every dating website has some way for members to express their interest in someone's profile whether it be through a profile liking function (i.e., a like button, a swipe left or right) or direct messages.

In 2019, the online dating company eHarmony commissioned a study to determine what heterosexual singles using online dating platforms look for in a partner as well as their profile. The study found that a strong interest in food, which was around 29% of respondents, is important for a potential partner. Other attributes include 31% of respondents want someone who does handy work, 26% want someone who would rather have a night in, and 25% want someone who is good with kids. eHarmony (2019) also found that people have more success getting a date if they have ever lived/worked abroad or speak a second language. Among those looking for committed relationships, the characteristics of honesty as well as being kind/considerate were of utmost importance in potential partners while assertiveness and being quiet were found to be among the least desirable qualities (eHarmony 2019). Furthermore, the study found that men prefer women that can cook and are introverts and that physical attraction is more important to men than women (eHarmony 2019). On the contrary, women prefer men that are good with kids, extroverted, and have a sense of humor. As for profession, the study found that the top four

desired professions revolve around health, education, and public protection such as doctor/nurse, teacher/professor, veterinarian, and firefighter/police officer (eHarmony 2019).

Academic researchers have also explored the idea behind profile attractiveness and what draws attention to a profile. For instance, Brand et al. (2012) concluded that people who are physically attractive also write more appealing profiles. Furthermore, confidence in the text description of the person predicted photo attractiveness and other photo measures such as photo masculinity and photo confidence. Similarly, Wotipka and High (2016) examine selective self-presentation (SSP), which is a filtering of unflattering information and only providing positive attributes, using online dating profiles. The varying amounts of SSP in these profiles produce impressions of social attraction and trust and these impressions were used to test the viewers' desire to date as well as likelihood to contact the profile creator. The results found that perceptions of social attraction and trust are related to the desire to date and contact a person directly on their profile (Wotipka and High 2016). The researchers also found that lower SSP corresponds with higher social attraction and is associated with increased trust of a profile owner. Thus, while controlling for age, sex, physical attraction, and current use of a dating site, the results confirm that the profile content influences viewers' desire to date and likelihood of contacting someone because of the impressions it generates (Wotipka and High 2016).

The Role of Incarceration on Dating Potential in an Online Environment

Transformations in U.S. dating patterns have occurred alongside high rates of incarceration. There are a number of reasons to believe that online dating is appealing to former inmates. Most online dating services stipulate that users who are convicted of a felony are not allowed to participate, but this stipulation is not broadcast on the dating platform and most online dating websites do not require a background check to create a profile. Online dating also requires

little financial investment, which might be appealing to individuals who have difficulty finding employment and who often experience lower wages in the regular sector. As such, people who are struggling financially might find the leisurely nature of online dating more appealing than in-person dates that require travel or rendezvous at restaurants and movie theaters. It is not uncommon for dating partners to talk for weeks, months, and even years exclusively online (Finkel et al. 2012). Furthermore, familiarity with online services might contribute to the appeal of online dating. The rising popularity of websites devoted to connecting inmates with people who are seeking romantic and platonic relationships with incarcerated individuals could make online dating feel like a trending and popular option. Additionally, online dating might also be beneficial to potential dating partners who might not want to exclude former inmates from their dating pool but who, nevertheless, have reservations about dating someone with a criminal record. Meeting virtually rather than in-person allows potential partners time to get to know one another casually without the pressure of sharing a physical space with one another. It can also help dating partners avoid typical dating moments such as introducing a date to one's family and friends who might object to their loved one's involvement with a former inmate.

Such a strategy might be beneficial if the stigma of incarceration scares potential partners or makes them more cautious. While this strategy might open the door to dating for individuals, it is also possible that having an incarceration record might repel potential dating partners altogether, even if dating occurs online. It is possible that someone would not immediately be attracted to or have the desire to date someone who was previously incarcerated regardless of their physical appearance, likes, or offense and sentence length. There are many reasons why, stigma being one of them. Someone may not want to be associated with or known as the person dating a criminal. Additionally, fear about the future in terms of finances may be a concern.

Someone may not want to have to support another person by having to lend them money or always having to pay for dates. If things progress, women, in particular, might be worried that a formerly incarcerated man might not be able to provide her white picket fence dream (Edin and Kefalas 2005).

Furthermore, Edin and Kefalas (2005) explain "promoting marriage among the poor has become the new war on poverty, Bush style. And it is true that the correlation between marital status and child poverty is strong." (p. 17). In other words, there are sharp declines in marriage found in impoverished urban areas, which led to a shift of the poor leaving behind the norm of being married but having children unwed (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Thus, there has been a strong push for the poor to marry. Interestingly, few have given up on the idea of marriage. In other words, marriage is still a goal for them, but disadvantaged women have placed such a high financial bar on marriage. Marriage is an elaborate end goal that aligns with the white picket fence American dream that requires a lot of work and money, which is not in favor of poor individuals. Therefore, it is fair to assume people recently released from prison, who are from a poor background, are not interested in marrying right away, but the idea of dating might still be of interest to them.

Previous research has explored how people respond to criminal stigma as it applies to online dating. Evans (2019) used online dating profiles of women only, that varied in race (Black, White, Latino), and shared them on 18 online dating platforms. The profiles of the women were similar except one disclosed in the written biography section that they were currently on parole. The results showed that Black and Latina women were matched less than White women with a criminal record (Evans 2019). In other words, a criminal record is more damaging to Black and Latina women who had a parole disclosure on their profile. in

comparison to White women, which seemed to have little to no effect. In fact, for White women, those who disclosed parole had a higher rate of matches than those who did not disclose parole. Evans (2019) found that parole disclosure affected Black and Latina women while a parole disclosure for White women did not hinder their matches and maybe even promoted more matches.

Since that study focused solely on women, Evans and Blount-Hill (2020) expanded the research to include both men and women profiles to examine the stigma with parole for dating on apps. Their results showed a negative effect of parole for matches on a dating app. More specifically, the researchers found that parole disclosure reduced matches for the White women, with a slight increase of matches for the Latina women, and no effect on the Black women (Evans and Blount-Hill 2020). Interestingly, the study found White women profiles, when disclosing parole, experienced the largest decline in dating app matches of the three racial groups, which contradicts the previously mentioned study as well as prior research regarding race and criminal stigma (Evans and Blount-Hill 2020). When looking at gender, the study concluded that men who are presented in these profiles, regardless of race, appearance or parole status, have a more difficult experience connecting with women through app-based dating (Evans and Blount-Hill 2020). For example, Latino men profiles matched with fewer users when disclosing parole, and Black and White men profiles were not significantly affected by parole disclosure. Also, there were relatively lower percentage of matches for men, which makes it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from the results (Evans and Blount-Hill 2020).

The two studies uncovered significant findings that support the negative effect of a criminal stigma on online dating. However, there are some limitations to be addressed. The two articles focus solely on parole status, which can be problematic. Viewers of these profiles may

not be well versed in the criminal justice system language, which makes it extremely possible that they were unaware of what the term parole entails and its relation to prison. On that same note, it is possible that viewers of the profile did not see the parole disclosure in the bio section. An additional setback for Evans and Blount-Hill (2020) was their study used software applications ("apps") designed for mobile devices. While this an upcoming and popular shift from traditional online dating using computer websites, the IRB restrictions limited the ability for researchers to communicate with their 'matches' to the artificial profiles. Therefore, they were unable to gain insight as to why someone would willingly match with the parolee. Also, these apps use algorithms to match potential users that are beyond the control of the researchers, which results in the inability to access a truly random sample for app-based dating users in this study. Certain apps are also catered towards different types of relationships that go beyond the scope of this research, but researchers had no way of measuring the length of relationship for these viewers of the parolee profile. For example, are people more willing to hook up with a parolee as opposed to forming a long-term relationship with them?

In order to combat these limitations, the current study utilizes fake online dating profiles in a vignette survey experiment, rather than going through a dating app. By doing this, it avoids the algorithms and matching processes used by the dating companies. Also, the study includes profiles that state previous incarceration as well as providing a follow-up survey to gauge participants' knowledge of criminality. Therefore, the incarceration status on a profile will be more obvious than in the parolee profile due to the follow-up questions regarding incarceration. By using M-turk, the current study will be able to have a random sample of respondents as well as communication with the respondents through the survey to better gauge their interest in the profile. Furthermore, the survey measures assess the type of attraction, the

length of a potential relationship, and seriousness of relationship to obtain a better understanding of whether an incarcerated person is viewed as long-term relationship material versus just a hookup.

METHODS

Mechanical Turk Sample

The vignette experiment was created in the online survey platform Qualtrics but disseminated to potential participants via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk). Mturk is an online source where researchers hire workers to receive their HITs (human intelligence tasks). HITs range from viewing content in a picture or video to answering questions in a survey format. Researchers have the ability to choose to request more or less on behalf of the worker such as demographic information. Also, researchers have a set pay based on their own judgement that is rewarded to the worker once the task is complete.

There has been an increasing demand for online panels to be used in survey research (Kimball 2019). Amazon provides Mturk as a center for inexpensive data collection. Mturk allows for researchers to recruit workers worldwide based on criteria set by the researcher. Mturk is a more cost friendly alternative in comparison to other online platforms (Berinsky, Huber, Lenz 2012; Eyal et al. 2012; Kimball 2019; Shank 2015). Mturk has been shown to obtain high quality samples for prescreened respondents compared to other platforms that draw their potential respondents from a larger pool (Ibarra et al. 2018). Not only does Mturk have higher familiarity (Eyal et al. 2012), but is resourceful for those with limited research funds such as graduate students or adjuncts and an excellent resource for academics concerned with specific populations because of its ability to target particular characteristics (Shank 2015).

While providing many advantages in research, Mturk has discrepancies that other researchers should take note of. First, Mturk is comprised mostly of younger and more liberal participants that are familiar with web-based technology (Ibarra et al. 2018). Thus, Mturk is considered biased for more general surveys because the participants underrepresent older and less educated people (Kimball 2019). Mturk respondents have also been shown to exhibit lower attention and comprehension of a survey especially when attention checks are not included within the survey (Eyal et al. 2012). Lastly, habitual responding has been noted in Mturk workers, which leads to a problem with external validity.

In order to gain the ideal participant pool for the current study, a screener survey was provided to Mturk workers asking their age, gender identity, sexual orientation and other demographic information including race, ethnicity, income, education, employment, current relationship status, and number of children. Additionally, the screener survey requested a minimum 95% task approval rating of workers, which means the worker usually completes their tasks in a satisfactory manner. Regardless of their responses to the screener survey questions, all Mturk workers were paid 15 cents for their participation in this short survey.

The researcher then analyzed the screener survey data to determine which respondents were eligible to participate in the vignette experiment. In order to qualify for the experiment, respondents had to be between the ages of 22 and 35 years old, identify as a cisgender woman or man, and identify as heterosexual or straight. Limiting the age range of participants between 22 and 35 years old aligns with life course research which identifies this range as important for life course development in regard to criminal activity as well as dating. This also prevents potential participants from being much older or much younger than the partner in the experimental vignettes (age 27) which could affect dating attraction. Focusing on only straight respondents

keeps the focus on incarceration and dating effects among heterosexuals. The study included a final sample of 237 Mturk workers, with 113 women viewing men's profiles and 124 men viewing women's profiles.

Experimental Design

Once enough workers were recruited from the screener survey, a link to the full vignette experiment was sent to qualifying participants and they were offered $2.00 for valid responses to the questionnaire included in the experiment. To test whether an individual is considered more desirable without a history of incarceration, two vignette experiments were conducted that varied two factors: (1) profile race (White and Black); and (2) profile incarceration (previous incarceration and no incarceration). This design was repeated for women participants (who evaluated only vignettes of men) and men participants (who evaluated only vignettes of women). Table 1 displays the full experimental design.

Table 1: Experimental Design

	Profile Manipulations			
Respondent Gender	*White, Incarcerated Profile*	*Black, Incarcerated Profile*	*White, Non-Incarcerated Profile*	*Black, Non-Incarcerated Profile*
Man	Condition 1_M (n=32)	Condition 2_M (n=33)	Condition 3_M (n=32)	Condition 4_M (n=27)
Woman	Condition 1_W (n=30)	Condition 2_W (n=24)	Condition 3_W (n=27)	Condition 4_W (n=32)

Note: Men respondents only viewed profiles of women belonging to the manipulated profiles while women respondents only viewed profiles of men belonging to the manipulated profiles. This kept the focus of the experiment on heterosexual dating relationships.

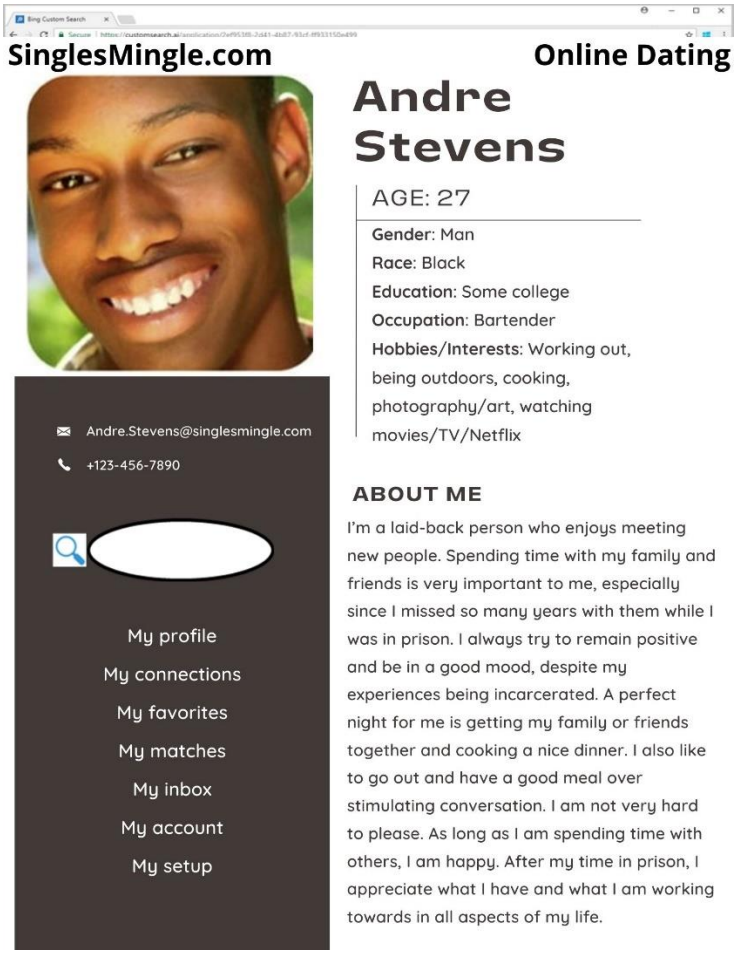
The vignettes replicate a typical online dating profile with a picture, age, race, education, occupation, hobbies/interests, and a more personal "about me" section where the profile owner provides information about themselves to share with viewers. An example of the vignettes

(profile) used in one of the experimental conditions is shown in Figure 1. All other vignettes are displayed in Appendix A.[1] Vignettes vary by the gender of the profile owner, race of the profile owner and an incarceration disclosure in the "about me" section. Respondents had to view the profile for a minimum of 35 seconds before they were able to proceed to the manipulation check questions.

Forcing participants to view the vignette profiles for 35 seconds should ensure participants fully read the profile information, thereby increasing the saliency of the profile manipulations, particularly the incarceration background of the potential partner (see next section for details). If a participant successfully completed the manipulation checks, they were then asked to complete a 15-minute survey on the dating desirability and attractiveness to the profile they had personally viewed. Additional information was collected about the participant including previous criminal history, preferences for dating incarcerated others, and experience with the criminal justice system.

[1] The profiles were modeled using a previous study by Alhabash, Hales, Baek, and Jung Oh (2014). Alhabash et. al (2014) included profiles with name, age, education, occupation, hobbies/interests, and an about me section, which was replicated in this study. Furthermore, the pictures in the previous study by Alhabash and colleagues (2014) were also used in the current study as they were rated equally in terms of physical attractiveness and show high consensus on the gender, race, and sexual orientation (heterosexual) of the profile pictures.

Figure 1: Vignette Profile Used in Condition 2*w*



Manipulation Checks

After reading their randomly assigned vignette, workers were provided with three separate manipulation check questions which they had two chances to respond correctly in order to proceed forward with the experiment. For the first two questions, the respondents had to provide the correct answers for the occupation and education level of the individual which was highlighted in their profile. This information was the same in all profiles, regardless of incarceration manipulation, so all participants were asked these questions. In order to ensure that respondents with the previously incarcerated profiles were aware of the incarceration status, the

third manipulation check question asked respondents to choose which of the following statements was not true concerning the profile they just viewed.

Figure 2 shows an example of this third manipulation check for viewers of an incarcerated profile while Figure 3 demonstrates how the third manipulation check question was presented to viewers of a non-incarcerated profile. These checks were put into place in order to ensure that viewers took time to view the profile as well as reflect on the information that was provided in the profile especially the incarceration disclosure. If a respondent failed twice, they were directed out of the experiment and were not paid for their time.

Figure 2: Example of Third Manipulation Check Question for Incarcerated Profile

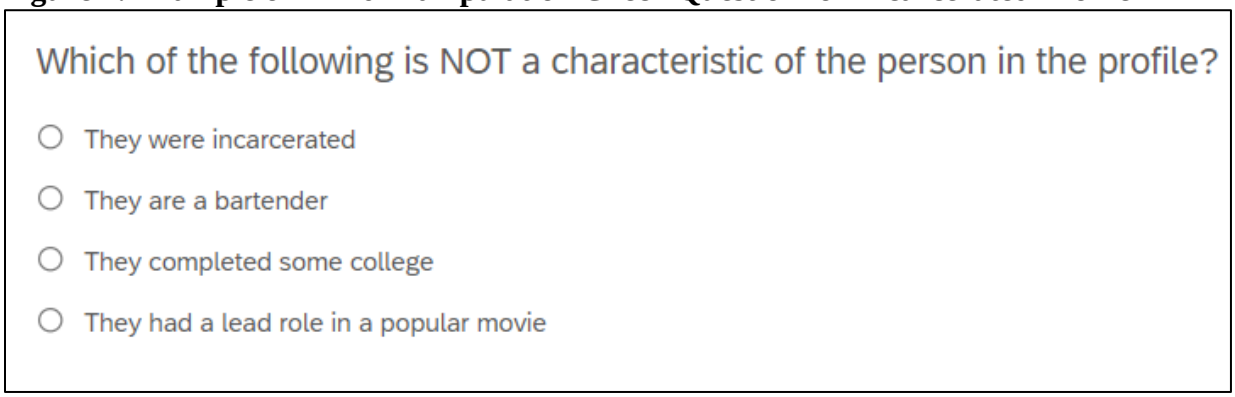
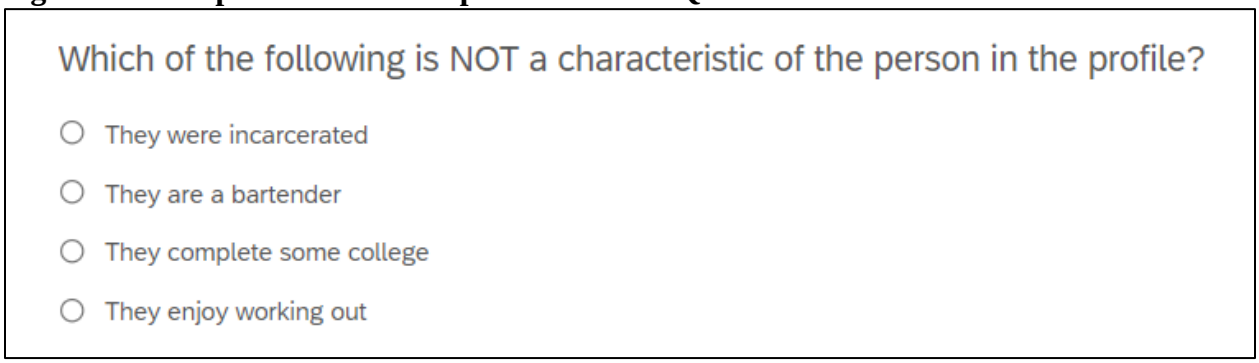


Figure 3: Example of Third Manipulation Check Question for Non-Incarcerated Profile



Dependent Variables: Dating Attraction and Relationship Desirability

In the experimental questionnaire, a combination of scales taken from previous studies are used to measure dating attraction and short- and long-term relationship desirability. The main scale of interest is a measure of measure of dating attraction from Campbell (1999). In addition to asking "How attractive do you find this person?", the scale includes several measures of how the respondent would feel about dating the profile partner as well as how they would be viewed by their family and friends of they were dating the person in the profile.

I also use a scale by Thomae and Houston (2015) to capture both the long- and short-term relationship potential of the vignette individual. Using a Likert scale, 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree, it not only includes a question about dating interest towards the profile partner, but also asks about the potential for a long-term romantic relationship and a short-term sexual relationship with the vignette partner. Previous factor analysis by Dilks, Kowalski, and McGrimmon (2022) found that the scale by Thomae and Houston (2015) can be divided into two subscales in order to get more clarification on the type of relationship desired. The first subscale reflects short-term relationships such as short sexual endeavors like hooking up while the second subscale reflects long-term relationships such as marriage and growing old together. It is important to point out that dating factors into the long-term relationship desirability subscale and is thus seen by respondents as a long-term commitment similar to marriage and cohabitation.

All responses for all questions in the three scales were recorded on 7-point Likert that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree with a neutral neither disagree or agree included. The composite scales in this study were created by combining and then averaging questions in

each scale. Averaging the composite scales retains these same scale anchor points. Appendix B includes a copy of the questions used in each of these scales.

Other Measured Variables

In addition to asking respondents to rate the vignette partner in terms of relationship desirability and dating attraction, data was also collected about their own potential criminal history and perceptions of crime. For example, it is important to know whether or not the respondent was involved with the criminal justice system either personally or through another acquaintance such as family or friends, both as a crime victim and perpetrator. As for perception, it is important to know where the respondent receives most of their information about crime such as a newspaper, the internet or government sources and to assess whether or not the severity of the crime as well as length of incarceration had an effect on their perception. Overall, these questions are used to generally gauge participant background with regard to knowledge, personal opinion as well as experience with the criminal justice system.

Questions were also asked to gain perspective on the participant's feelings on dating others who were incarcerated. For example, the experiment asked participants when they think the most appropriate time to bring up a criminal record to a potential partner is. Should a criminal record be disclosed before or on the first date, on the second date, between the third and fifth, or after the fifth date? Participants were also asked if they were to date someone who was incarcerated then what length of incarceration time would be most acceptable with. Would they be willing to date someone who was incarcerated for 1 month, 3 months, 6 months, a year, 3 years, etc? In addition, respondents were also asked a series of questions regarding their experience with the criminal justice system, which can be found in Appendix C.

RESULTS

Sample Descriptive Statistics

Women Participants

The study included a sample of 113 women with an average age of approximately 29 years old. More than half of the women were White with 32% identifying as non-White. A large majority of participants were in some form of a relationship during the time of this study whereas 36% shared they were single during this time. Most of the women participants had some type of education beyond high school with a bachelor's degree being the most frequent education level and high school diploma or equivalent being the second highest. In relation to crime, a vast majority of the women do not know someone who is currently incarcerated while roughly 39% of women do know someone who is currently incarcerated. Also, most of the women did not experience much victimization themselves nor do they have knowledge of a friend or family member being a victim of the crime. The descriptive statistics for women can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Sample of Descriptive Statistics for Women Participants

Age (in years)	
Mean	29.74
Standard Deviation	3.18
Min/Max	22 / 35
	Frequency (%)
Race	
White	76 (67.86)
Non-White	36 (32.14)
Prefer not to answer	1 (0.01)
Relationship Status	
Single	41 (36.28)
Not Single	72 (63.72)
Level of Education	
Less than high school diploma	1 (0.01)
High school diploma or equivalent	28 (24.78)
Associate degree	6 (5.31)
Bachelor's degree (BA, BS)	65 (57.52)

Master's degree (MA, MS, MEd)	13 (11.50)
Know Someone Incarcerated	
No	69 (61.06)
Yes	44 (38.94)
Been a Victim of a Crime	
No	97 (85.84)
Yes	16 (14.16)
Know Someone Who Was a Victim	
No	85 (75.22)
Yes	28 (24.78)

N = 113

Men Participants

There was a sample of 124 men in this study with the average age being approximately 30 years old, which is similar to the women participants. For race, an overwhelming large number of men identified as White and about 27% identified as non-White. Unlike the women participants, the men were split relatively evenly between single and not single during the time of the study with 48% reported to be single and 52% reported not being single. Similar, to women, an overwhelming number of men participants received a bachelor's degree (65%) and a high school diploma or equivalent was second highest with roughly 19% of men. When focusing on crime specifically, most men do not know someone who is currently incarcerated while only about 31% know someone currently incarcerated. The number of men participants who reported having experience with victimization was higher than women at 28% and roughly 31% knew someone besides themselves that has been a victim of a crime. Descriptive statistics for men can be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Sample of Descriptive Statistics for Men Participants

Age (in years)	
Mean	30.38
Standard Deviation	2.92
Min/Max	22 / 35
	Frequency (%)

Race	
White	91 (73.39)
Non-White	33 (26.61)
Relationship Status	
Single	60 (48.39)
Not Single	64 (51.61)
Level of Education	
Less than high school diploma	1 (0.81)
High school diploma or equivalent	24 (19.35)
Associate degree	2 (0.02)
Bachelor's degree (BA, BS)	80 (64.52)
Master's degree (MA, MS, MEd)	14 (11.29)
Doctorate degree (PhD, EdD, JD, MD)	2 (1.61)
Other (vocational)	1 (0.01)
Know Someone Incarcerated	
No	86 (69.35)
Yes	38 (30.65)
Been a Victim of a Crime	
No	89 (71.77)
Yes	35 (28.23)
Know Someone Who Was a Victim	
No	86 (69.35)
Yes	38 (30.65)

N = 124

Regression Analyses

A series of OLS regression models were estimated in order to test the interactive and main effects of the experimental independent variables on participants' ratings of the relationship desirability and dating attraction of the vignette dating profiles. All regressions test for a two-way interaction effect between incarceration background of the profile partner (incarcerated vs. not incarcerated) and race of the profile partner (Black vs. White). If the interaction effect is not significant, main effects for these variables are examined. Regression models are estimated separately for men and women participants to account for any differences due to participant gender. For both men and women, three regression models are estimated, one for each of the

three dependent variables: dating attraction and long- and short-term relationship desirability. Regression results for women participants are in Table 4 while the results for men are in Table 5.

Women Participants

Regression results for women participants are reported in Table 4 for each dependent variable[2]. For women participants, there was no significant findings for a two-way interaction effect between incarceration background of the profile partner and the race of the profile partner for any dependent variable scale. In other words, there was no relationship between incarceration and any of the dependent variables with race being a moderating third variable. Since no significant relationship was found for the two-way interaction, the main effects of these variables were examined further in which statistically significant results were found.

The main effect of incarceration was statistically significant across all three dependent variable scales, which indicates that a disclosure of incarceration on the profile had an effect on dating attraction and relationship desirability for both short- and long-term relationships. Furthermore, the coefficients for the variable across all three dependent variable scales were negative meaning that the inclusion of an incarceration status decreased ratings of dating attractiveness and relationship desirability, both short- and long-term. Specifically, women found incarcerated men less attractive for dating and less desirable for both short- and long-term relationships as compared to non-incarcerated men. The main effect of race was also statistically significant but only for the dating attraction scale. The positive coefficient means women rated the White man partner significantly more attractive for dating than then the Black man partner.

For the control variables, there was statistically significant findings for current relationship status and knowing someone who has been or is incarcerated. Current relationship

[2] The final results for women only included 112 participants because one woman did not disclose her race or ethnicity. Therefore, her responses were omitted from the regression analysis.

status had an effect on dating attraction as well as long-term relationship desirability. The coefficients were both negative, meaning if the respondent was in a relationship, they rated the profile partner lower on both dating attraction and long-term relationship desirability as compared to single women participants. Also, knowing someone who was or is currently incarcerated had a statistically significant effect on dating attraction and long-term relationship desirability. These coefficients were both positive, meaning respondents who know someone currently or previously incarcerated rated the vignette partner higher on attractiveness and long-term relationship desirability as compared to those who do not know an incareree. No other statistically significant findings were found for control variables across dependent variable scales.

Table 4: Women Participant OLS Regression Results

	DEPENDENT VARIABLE SCALES		
	Dating Attraction Scale	**Relationship Desirability Scales**	
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES		***Long-term***	***Short-term***
Two-way Interaction			
Incarceration *X* Profile Race	-0.05	0.01	0.32
	(0.47)	(0.63)	(0.67)
Main Effects			
Incarceration (Yes=1)	-0.98***	-1.17***	-1.12**
	(0.36)	(0.46)	(0.51)
Profile Race (White=1, Black=0)	0.50**	0.59	0.22
	(0.24)	(0.38)	(0.38)
Control Variables			
Age	-0.02	-0.04	-0.05
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Respondent Race (White=1)	0.41	0.57	0.41
	(0.26)	(0.37)	(0.38)
Respondent Relationship Status (Single=1)	-0.43*	-0.60*	-0.06
	(0.24)	(0.33)	(0.35)
Prior Victimization (Yes=1)	-0.61	-0.59	-0.89
	(0.38)	(0.51)	(0.55)

Know Someone Incarcerated (Yes=1)	0.61**	0.64*	0.52
	(0.25)	(0.35)	(0.38)
Cons	5.23***	5.06*	5.73***
	(1.05)	(1.55)	(1.57)
SUMMARY STATISTICS			
Adjusted R^2	0.19	0.14	0.09
N	112	112	112
Dependent Variable Mean	4.75	4.07	4.05
(Std. Deviation)	(1.36)	(1.81)	(1.82)

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.
* $p<.10$; ** $p<.05$, *** $p<.01$; two-tailed tests

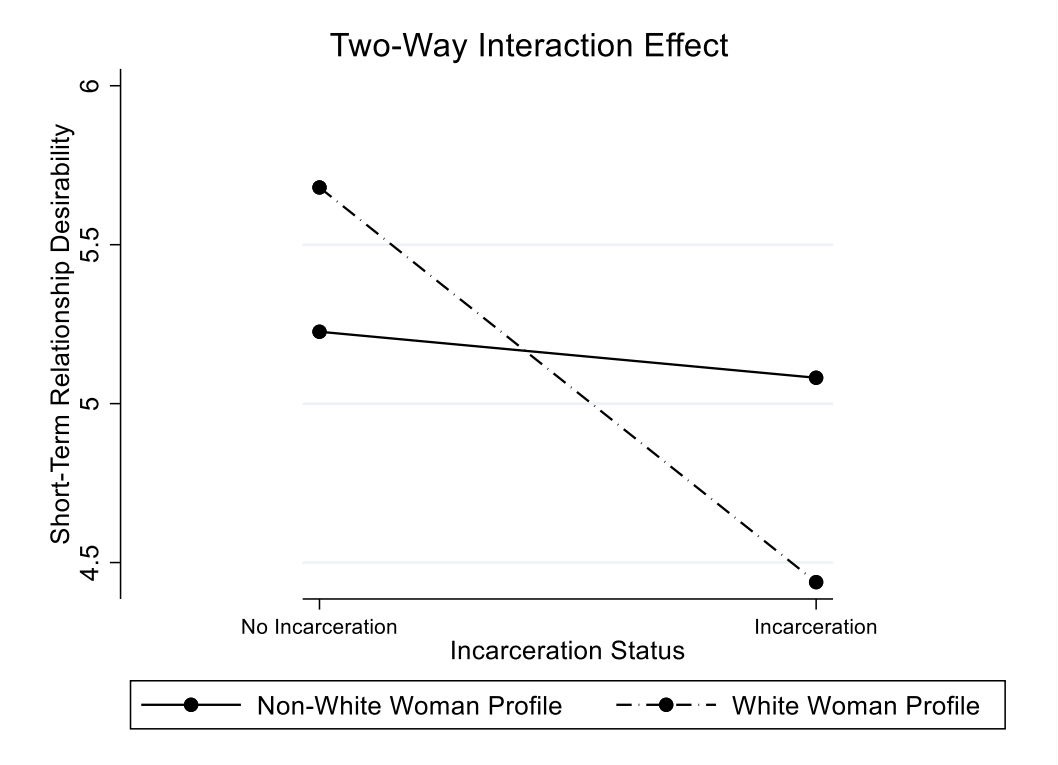
Men Participants

The regression results for men participants are reported in Table 5 for each dependent variable scale[3]. For men participants, there was a statistically significant two-way interaction effect for short-term desirability only. This interaction effect is graphed in Figure 4 to aid in its interpretation.

There are two important features of this interaction. First, when there is no incarceration disclosure on the profile, White women are found more desirable than Black women for a short-term relationship. However, when an incarceration disclosure is included, this difference is reversed. Black women are found more desirable than incarcerated White women for a short-term relationship. Second, although short-term relationship desirability decreases for both Black and White women when an incarceration history is disclosed, this decrease is greater for White women as compared to Black women. Specifically, when there is a shift from no incarceration disclosure to an incarceration disclosure, the White woman drops over a full point in terms of desirability, whereas the Black woman decreases only very slightly when we shift from no incarceration to incarceration. Therefore, incarceration status has a bigger impact on the short-term desirability of White women than it does for Black women.

[3] The final results for men only included 123 participants because one man was removed as an outlier.

Figure 4: Two-Way Interaction Effect for Incarceration and Race on Short-Term Relationship Desirability for Men Participants



When examining the main effects, there is a statistically significant effect of incarceration status on the dating attraction scale. The coefficient is negative and indicates when an incarceration status was included in the profile, men rate the woman lower on the dating attractiveness scale, as compared to a non-incarcerated woman. There is no statistical significance with the race main effect across the three dependent variable scales.

After assessing results for various control variables, there was a statistically significant relationship between current relationship status of the participant and short-term relationship desirability scale. The coefficient in this instance is negative. In other words, men participants in relationships rated the women vignette partners as less suitable for short-term relationships as compared to men who were single. There were no other statistically significant findings that occurred for the remaining control variables across the three dependent variable scales.

Table 5: Men Participant Regression Results

	DEPENDENT VARIABLE SCALES		
	Dating Attraction Scale	**Relationship Desirability Scales**	
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES		***Long-term***	***Short-term***
Two-way Interaction			
Incarceration *X* Profile Race	-0.09 (0.44)	-0.09 (0.60)	-1.09* (0.60)
Main Effects			
Incarceration (Yes=1)	-0.60* (0.33)	-0.53 (0.43)	-0.14 (0.42)
Profile Race (White=1, Black=0)	0.08 (0.33)	0.02 (0.47)	0.45 (0.39)
Control Variables			
Age	0.04 (0.04)	0.05 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)
Respondent Race (White=1)	0.06 (0.25)	0.25 (0.35)	-0.36 (0.35)
Respondent Relationship Status (Single=1)	-0.12 (0.24)	-0.44 (0.31)	-0.65** (0.32)
Prior Victimization (Yes=1)	-0.10 (0.27)	-0.11 (0.38)	0.19 (0.34)
Know Someone Incarcerated (Yes=1)	0.18 (0.25)	0.35 (0.34)	-0.20 (0.37)
Cons	4.16*** (1.29)	3.19* (1.75)	5.13*** (1.62)
SUMMARY STATISTICS			
Adjusted R^2	0.02	0.00	0.05
N	123	123	123
Dependent Variable Mean (Std. Deviation)	5.05 (1.27)	4.44 (1.68)	5.07 (1.74)

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.
* $p<.10$; ** $p<.05$, ***$p<.01$; two-tailed tests

DISCUSSION

The current study expanded upon and addressed limitations that were present in previous studies of incarceration effects on dating and relationships. An experimental vignette was created

to assess desirability and dating attraction of both Black and White men and women who varied in their incarceration histories. The vignette mimicked information typically found in online dating profiles that one would see on popular dating websites. I manipulated incarceration on profiles (either previously incarcerated or no mention of incarceration) as well as race (either White or Black) for the profile owners. The focus was on evaluations of potential partners among only heterosexual men and women, specifically those aged 22 to 35 years old, a life course period in which much dating and relationship formation occurs. A series of scales were included to not only measure dating attraction of the profile owner, but also general relationship desirability of the profile owner for both short- and long-term relationships.

Main Findings

Dating Attraction

The dating attraction scale measured how attractive the respondent found the profile partner as well as how much the respondent would actually like to enter into a dating relationship with profile partner. It also measured not only how the respondent would feel about themselves dating the vignette partner, but how their friends/family would feel about them dating the partner too. For the dating attraction scale, both women and men respondents had significant negative reactions to profiles that disclosed an incarceration history. Specifically, when incarceration status was present on the profile, both men and women rated the profile partner lower in dating attraction as compared to the non-incarcerated profile owners.

These findings regarding dating attraction align with previous research that people with an incarceration status are at a disadvantage in many aspects of life (Pager 2003; Western and Pettit 2010; Stewart and Uggen 2019). Considering the stigma associated with a criminal record, it is not surprising that people may not be willing to date someone who was previously

incarcerated. Not to mention, there are a lot of setbacks such as lack of education and limited job opportunity that coincide with incarceration. Therefore, not having a stable job or proper education can be unattractive for potential daters, both men and women.

Also, with regard to dating attraction, women are significantly impacted by a man's race, independent of incarceration status. Women rated dating attraction higher if the profile partner was a White man, as compared to a Black man. These results reflect previous research conducted on dating and race. For example, other studies have found people tend to date someone within their own racial group (Levin, Taylor, and Caudle 2007). Furthermore, Alhabash et. al (2014) found that profile owners who were White rated by predominantly White participants were more favorable in terms of attractiveness. The results of this study confirm these prior findings, at least for women daters.

Long-Term Relationship Desirability

The long-term relationship desirability scale was measured by imagining a long-term relationship with the profile partner. The measurement of this long-term variable included statements involving living with and marrying the profile partner, having children with the profile partner, and growing old with the profile partner. Essentially, the statements about long-term relationships focused on more intense or serious commitments between the two, including dating. Interestingly, men had no reported significant findings between independent or control variables and long-term relationship status. One explanation could be that men put less thought or attention into long-term relationships in comparison to women. In other words, men are not as invested as women in finding a long-term relationship partner or men are not as particular as women when it comes to entering into a long-term relationship with someone. Notice that for

men (Table 5), the experimental and control variables explained 0% of the variability in men's rating of the profile partner's long-term relationship desirability. Thus, either men are not thoughtful about the qualities they want in a long-term partner or those qualities they are concerned with, were not measured in this study.

There was a significant relationship between incarceration and long-term relationship desirability for women respondents. Women rated men with an incarceration status less desirability for a long-term relationship compared to non-incarcerated men. In relation to this study, the long-term relationship scale measured important long-term life occurrences such as marriage or children. As Washington and Woldoff (2014) found, decisions involving marriage are dependent on a father's ability to have secure employment. Therefore, if a father is not able to secure employment then women are not as eager to get married.

The results from the measure of long-term relationship desirability match previous research in the sense that women do not want to enter into a potentially long-term relationship with a man that is unable to hold stable employment, which later will affect their likelihood of marriage and children. In contrast to men, the included experimental and control variables account for 14% of women's variability in rating long-term relationship desirability.

Short-Term Relationship Desirability

The short-term relationship desirability scale aimed at measuring less serious commitments than the long-term scale. For example, respondents were asked about their willingness to hook up with the profile partner and enter into a sexual relationship with the person as well. Again, these measurements were more aimed towards a sexually physical relationship as opposed to serious commitment like marriage and living together. The results for both women and men respondents indicated an effect by incarceration status, but in different

ways. Specifically, incarceration had a main effect for women while for men incarceration had an effect moderated by race.

Women respondents rated men lower for short-term desirability if they had an incarceration disclosure on their profile. Women could be focusing more on the long-term aspect of relationships even when entering into a short-term relationship. Therefore, the financial setbacks of someone incarcerated that effect employment, marriage, and raising children could be enough for women to sustain from any type of relationship with an incarcerated men whether it be short or long term. Again, this aligns with previous research that women are not interested in men who are unable to hold down a stable job, which is common among previously incarcerated men.

For men respondents, when no incarceration status was disclosed on the profile, White women were rated higher on short-term desirability in comparison to Black women. This aligns with current research by Bany et. al (2014) which found that Black women are less desired by men because of a perception of their decreased femininity. For example, Black women were perceived as being loud, aggressive, talkative, lacking in moral values, and altogether had lower levels of attractiveness compared to women in all other racial groups (Bany et. al 2014). However, when an incarceration status was disclosed on the profile, White women were rated much lower than in comparison to no incarceration status. Furthermore, when an incarceration status was disclosed, Black women were rated higher on desirability compared to White women. This finding could be attributed to the fact that criminality is stereotyped to be associated with Blacks and other racial and ethnically minoritized individuals (Drakulich 2012). It could be that an incarcerated White woman violates race stereotypes surrounding criminality and is penalized by men for this deviance. Black women on the other hand, are often stereotyped as

criminal so an incarceration history does not create a violation of race stereotypes so the effect on sort-term relationship desirability is not as negative (Drakulich 2012). As mentioned earlier, Agan and Starr (2017) found that "Ban the Box" efforts were initiated to help assist those with felony convictions, but their results found that BTB actually caused more racial discrimination in job applications. In other words, there is perceived criminality with racially minoritized groups especially Blacks. Agan and Starr's (2017) work supports the claim that the reason for the decline in White women's attractiveness to men for short term relationships when incarcerated may be due to violations of an expectation of non-criminality for White women. However, further research is needed to pinpoint the exact reasons for this pattern of results.

Ancillary Findings

Current Relationship Status of the Respondent

Both women and men had a significant effect of current relationship status. All participants currently in relationships rated the profile partner lower. However, for women, it affects dating attraction as well as long-term relationship desirability while for men, it affected their short-term relationship desirability. Overall, it appears that partnered people rate potential partners lower perhaps because they feel bad about judging someone else or comparing them to their own partner. Logically, this makes sense. If someone is in a relationship, it is not as common for them to actively be seeking a partner online let alone rating them overtly attractive in respect for their current partner.

With that being said, it is interesting because the same results were not found for men. As mentioned, current relationship status affects men respondents for short-term relationship desirability. Therefore, men respondents in a relationship currently were not desiring a short-

term relationship with respondents. This result aligns with the culture that some men are more interested in sexual relationships such as hookups as opposed to a serious relationship. In other words, men are more fixated on a short-term relationship and are likely to not engage in a physical/sexual relationship with someone whenever they are currently in a sexual relationship themselves. The current study did not ask what kind of relationship respondents were currently involved in. If this information were available, it would be possible to determine if the type of current relationship – sexual, casual or exclusive dating, cohabitation, marriage, etc. – was the reason for this difference between men and women.

Personal Connection to Incarcerated Individual(s)

Regardless of profile incarceration status, the significant effect of knowing someone incarcerated was present for women respondents but not for men. Women rate all profile partner, regardless of incarceration status, higher if the women knew someone who was/is incarcerated. This finding is quite counterintuitive given the previous negative main effect of profile incarceration on dating attraction and relationship desirability. On one hand, women who have a personal attachment to an incarceree may not see time served as a negative. Women could be showing more empathy and compassion for potential partners in this type of situation. Also, there could be some type of familiarity or comfortability level being met. If women know someone who is incarcerated, it will make them more open to being with someone long-term who is also incarcerated because the expectations and setbacks are known. Therefore, women may be more aware and conscious of the obstacles they are facing with a potential partner being incarcerated because they have familiarity with someone else who has been incarcerated.

However, women also rated all incarcerated men profiles lower on dating attraction as well as short- and long-term relationship desirability. Since knowing someone who is or

previously was incarcerated was used only as a control variable, it impacts women's assessments whether or not the profile owner was or was not incarcerated. Further analyses of the data should explore whether this personal relationship interacts with the incarceration history of the profile owner to affect women's ratings of potential partners or if this continues to be a universal effect regardless of a potential partner's incarceration history.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite finding that incarceration does tend to have an effect on attractiveness and relationship desirability, this study is not without limitations. First, being that this is an experiment and provided replications of online dating profiles, some might argue that the results may not truly reflect real-life online dating environments. This is true. However, the fact that participants had to think about what they would do if they viewed a dating profile of a former incarceree, is correlated to what they may actually do if they ever encounter this situation in the future. According to the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein 1980), actual behavior is determined by behavioral intention. Furthermore, if this intended behavior is perceived as controllable by an individual, the link between behavioral intention and actual behavior is significantly increased (Ajzen 1985). This latter relationship is the theory of planned behavior. Therefore, while experiments in general are artificial and lack some realism, they are helpful to understand what people might do in the future because of the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior.

Also, as discussed earlier, online dating services express that users who are convicted of a felony are not allowed to participate, but this criterion is not broadcast on the dating platform. Therefore, most online dating websites do not require a background check to create a profile, nor

do they force profile makers to include their criminal history. Therefore, previous incarceration most likely would not be as inherently obvious to those seeking out a partner through online dating. Also, respondents were paid to participate which further argues against the realistic nature of actually dating. Future research might seek actual people who were recently released from prison or jail to interview and assess their dating outcomes.

A second limitation is that this study included participants who are not single. It is a possibility that the respondents that are currently in a relationship are bringing down the significance of the results. For example, someone in a relationship might have automatically rated profile partners lower on dating attraction and relationship desirability because of consideration for their current partner and not the incarceration disclosure itself. The results might have been stronger or more realistic if only single people were used as participants in the experiment. However, despite using both single and non-single people, the study still showed significant results and included a wide range of men and women with different demographics, which provides a diversity of participants for this study.

Also concerning about the experimental participants is the large portion of highly educated women and men. Approximately 58% of women and 65% of men participants had bachelor's degrees. Previous research has argued that education levels may affect views on incarceration. Crews (2009) posits that people with higher levels of education have more tolerant attitudes toward those who engage in criminal behavior. There are two opposing explanations (Crews 2009). On the one hand, those with a high education are confronted less frequently with criminality, leading to less exposure to those with a criminal record and making them less likely to fall victim to crime. In contrast, more educated individuals tend to have more liberal world

views, including a higher acceptance of criminality. Both explanations, however, may lead highly educated respondents to evaluate those with a criminal record less harshly as compared to individuals with less than a college educated. Thus, the results may yield more significance regarding the effect of incarceration if a sample with less educational attainment was utilized. Evidence of this effect can be seen in the different effects of incarceration for men versus women respondents. The women sample is slightly less educated than the sample of men and women negatively evaluated the incarcerated profile across all dependent variables. Future research may want to examine the connection between dating attraction and relationship desirability with a more varied educational pool of participants.

There is a potential issue of statistical power due to the small samples for each condition. A vignette experiment of roughly 60 participants per condition would have been more sufficient for this study. However, the small sample was partly due to the controlled nature of the experiment. For example, this study included only heterosexual or straight individuals who identify as either cisgender men or women within a certain age range. Small sample sizes are less of an issue in experimental settings since the design of the experiment attempts to control for external factors, allowing the researcher to hone in on the causal effect between and independent and dependent variables. However, the collection of more participant data could help validate the robustness of the findings.

Another limitation is regarding the incarceration disclosure itself. The incarcerated profiles indicated twice that the owner had been “incarcerated”, but there was no discussion of the crime they were charged with or the length of time they were incarcerated for. Respondents were asked in the survey following the experiment, how long is too long for a potential partner to

be incarcerated for before they were considered “undatable.” This measure ranges from incarceration in months to years. Respondents were asked to respond either yes or no if a particular among of time was an acceptable length of incarceration for their potential partner. Results from this observation can be found on Table 6. Interestingly enough, this study found that after 6 months of incarceration, both men and women respondents no longer find it acceptable to be in a relationship with an incarcerated individual. Therefore, future research may want to address this shift in no longer being dateable after 6 months or more of incarceration by exploring not only length of incarceration, but crime committed as well. Although most online dating platforms prohibit felons from creating profiles and using the sites, those with misdemeanor or less minor convictions are still able to participate in online dating. Since time served is correlated with the severity of the crime committed, it would be important to assess whether prison length and crime type similarly impact dating attraction and relationship desirability.

Table 6: Acceptability of Incarceration Length for a Potential Partner by Gender

	Acceptability for a Potential Partner			
	WOMEN		***MEN***	
	No	***Yes***	***No***	***Yes***
Length of Incarceration	Frequency (%)	*Frequency (%)*	*Frequency (%)*	*Frequency (%)*
1 Month	40 (35.40)	73 (64.60)	29 (23.39)	95 (76.61)
3 Months	45 (39.82)	68 (60.18)	32 (25.81)	92 (74.19)
6 Months	61 (53.98)	52 (46.02)	50 (40.32)	74 (59.68)
1 Year	74 (65.49)	39 (34.51)	62 (50.00)	62 (50.00)

3 Years	84 (74.34)	29 (25.66)	96 (77.42)	28 (22.58)
5 Years	95 (84.07)	18 (15.93)	96 (77.42)	28 (22.58)
8 Years	98 (86.73)	15 (13.27)	106 (85.48)	18 (14.52)
10 Years	101 (89.38)	12 (10.62)	106 (85.48)	18 (14.52)

Third, this study had a limited age range (22 to 35 years old) for respondents and only accepted respondents that identified as either woman or man and heterosexual. Future research may want to include larger age spans to see if certain generations are more likely or less likely to be attracted to someone incarcerated and desire a relationship with someone incarcerated. Also, future research might want to survey those with non-binary gender identities or lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual orientations to see if dating attraction to previously incarcerated individuals varies from those patterns found among straight men and women.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings show that incarceration does have an effect on dating attraction and overall desirability. People are not necessarily attracted to or interested in having a relationship with someone who has been incarcerated before. The results of this study further argue that previously incarcerated individuals face yet another obstacle due to the stigma surrounding their criminal history. Not only are people with a previous criminal record at a disadvantage for life course occurrences such as education, employment, and marriage, but now their chances of dating have lowered.

Since a large portion of the population is currently or has been incarcerated, it is likely individuals will come across a potential dating partner who has served some jail or prison time. Therefore, the goal of this research is to help de-stigmatize perceptions surrounding incarceration because the likelihood of coming in contact with someone who was incarcerated is relatively high. Again, it is important to note that dating is an occurrence for almost everyone in society yet people who are incarcerated will experience more difficulty. However, if more people were made aware of or educated about the effects of incarceration, perhaps it would not be as surprising or off putting to form a connection with someone who was incarcerated. It is important to learn about their experience before immediately rejecting them based solely on a criminal disclosure on their profile.

The current study is important by focusing on both men and women. The gender differences identified are important for a number of reasons. It appears that across the board, women are not interested in having any type of relationship with them whether it be short- or long-term, including dating. For men, incarceration status only has an effect on short-term relationship desirability (i.e., sexual relationships), but is complicated by the race of a previously incarcerated woman. Men find White incarcerated women less desirable for sexual relationships as compared to Black incarcerated women. Although the incarceration rates of women on the rise, it does appear that this will affect men's preferences for or ability to find a suitable dating or long-term partner. Instead, only men's casual, sexual relationships may be affected.

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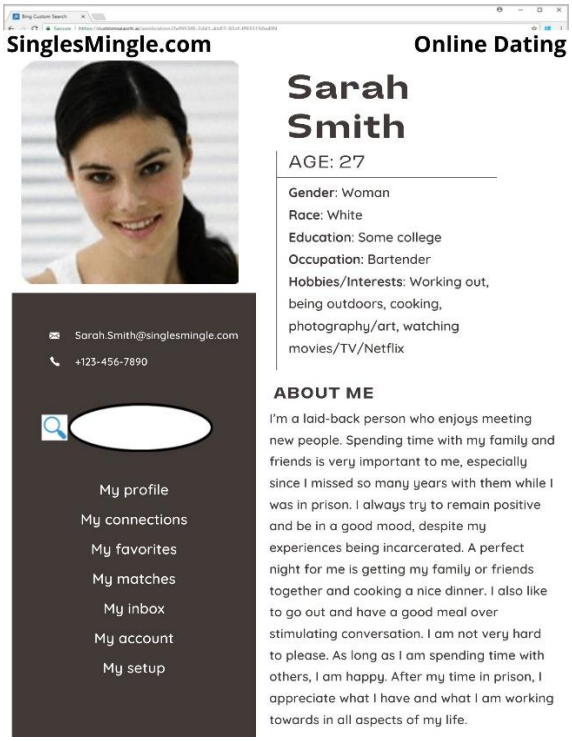
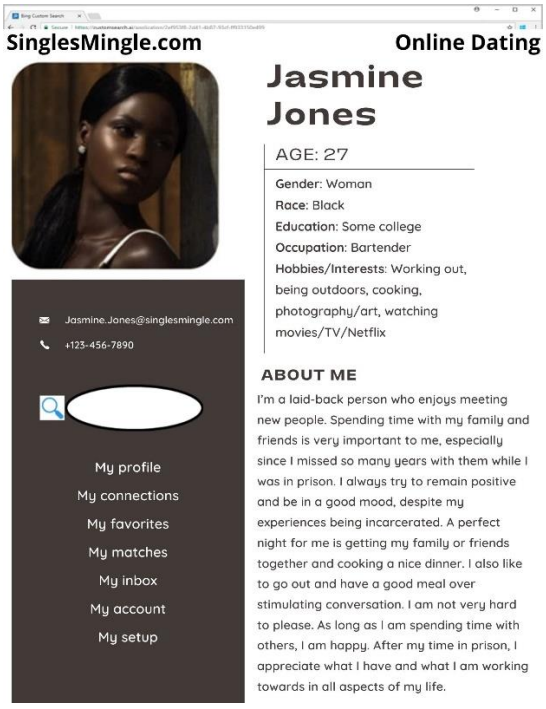
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Vignette Profiles by Experimental Condition

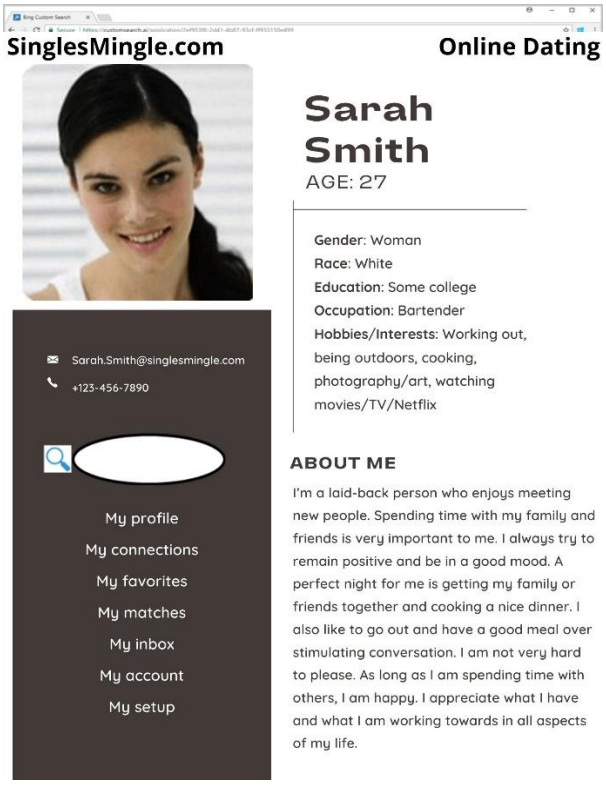
Vignette Profile Shown to Men in Condition 1$_M$



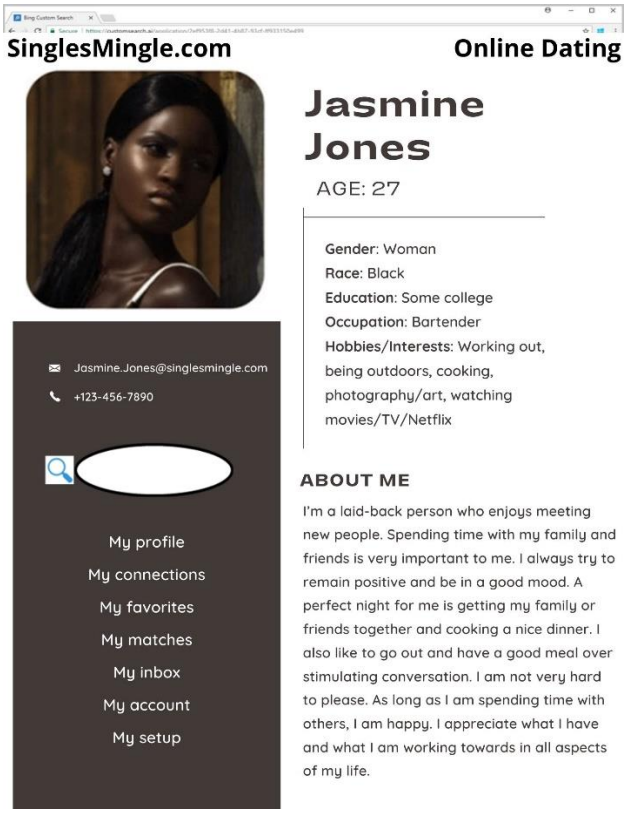
Vignette Profile Shown to Men in Condition 2$_M$



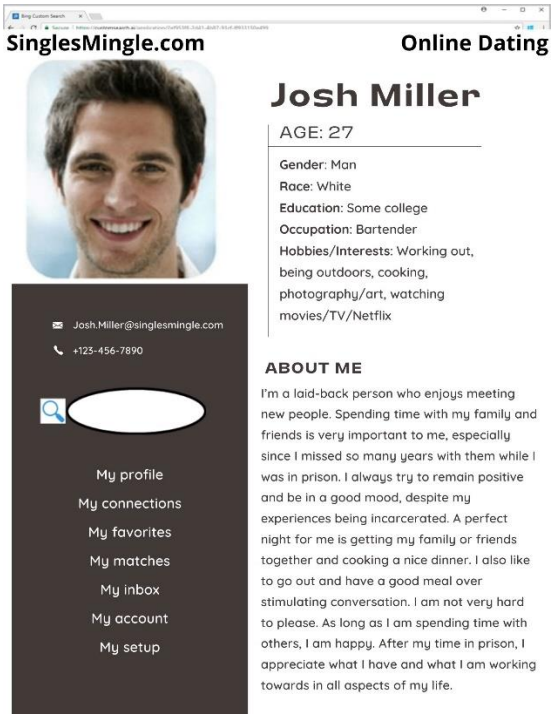
Vignette Profile Shown to Men in Condition 3$_M$



Vignette Profile Shown to Men in Condition 4$_M$

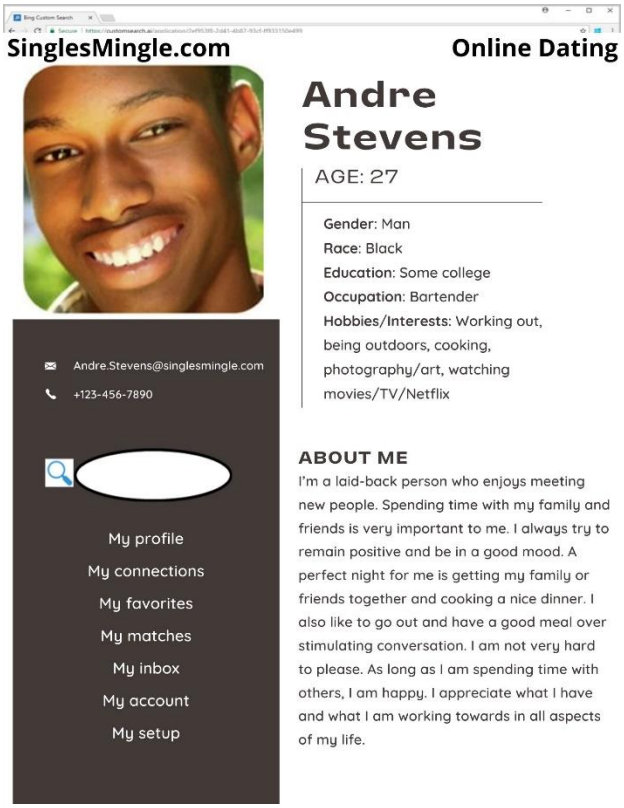


Vignette Profile Shown to Women in Condition 1$_w$



Vignette Profile Shown to Women in Condition 3$_w$

Vignette Profile Shown to Women in Condition 4$_w$



Appendix B: Dependent Variable Scales

Romantic Attraction Scale (Campbell 1999)	**Relationship Desirability Scale** (Thomae and Houston 2015)
How attractive do you find this person?	I would be interested in hooking up with a person like this.†
How desirable would you find this person as a dating partner?	I would be interested in having a sexual relationship with a person like this.†
How much would you actually like to date this person?	I would be interested in dating a person like this.*
How would you feel about yourself if you were dating this person?	I could imagine a long-term relationship with a person like this.*
How do you think your friends would feel about you if you were dating this person?	I could imagine marrying a person like this.*
	I can see a person like this being a parent of my children.*
	I can picture growing old with a person like this.*
	Their aims in life are similar to my own.*
	I can imagine living with a person like this.*
	I think a person like this would be a good match for me in a romantic relationship.*
	I don't like the attitudes of people like this.
	Dealing with a person like this would probably cause lots of problems and result in many fights.
	I dislike people like this.

NOTES: All responses for all questions are recorded on 7-point Likert scales. Questions in *italics* are reverse coded. *Denotes items in the long-term relationship desirability scale. †Denotes items in the short-term relationship desirability scale.

Appendix C: Full List of Survey Questions in Screener and Experimental Questionnaires

1. Do you know someone who has been or is incarcerated (including yourself)?
   No
   If yes, please specify
2. How would you describe the relationship with the person incarcerated?
   Self
   Parent
   Spouse
   Partner/Boyfriend/Girlfriend
   Sibling
   Extended family (grandparent, uncle, aunt, cousin)
   Friend
   Other, please specify
3. Why were they incarcerated (what was their charge)?
4. How long were or are they incarcerated for (months)?
5. As a whole, would you describe your interactions(s) with the criminal justice system in the past 2 years as..
   Very negative
   Quite negative
   Neither negative nor positive
   Quite positive
   Very Positive
   No interaction
6. From your perspective, is everyone who has been incarcerated guilty?
   No
   Unsure
   Yes
7. Do you think judges are bias against certain people?
   Definitely not
   Probably not
   Might or might not
   Probably yes
   Definitely yes
8. Do you think police are bias against certain people?
   Definitely not
   Probably not
   Might or might not
   Probably yes
   Definitely yes
9. Considering all the different parts of the criminal justice system (the police, the courts, the prison, probation and parole systems), how confident are you that the criminal justice system as a whole is effective?
   Not at all confident
   Not very confident
   Neutral

Fairly confident
Completely confident

10. When do you think it is appropriate to bring up a criminal record?
    Before or on the first date
    On the second date
    Between the third and fifth date
    After the fifth date
11. If you were to date someone who was incarcerated, what length of incarceration time would you find acceptable?
    1 month: Yes or No
    3 months: Yes or No
    6 months: Yes or No
    1 year: Yes or No
    3 years: Yes or No
    5 years: Yes or No
    8 years: Yes or No
    10 or more years: Yes or No
12. Have you ever been a victim of a crime
    No
    Yes
13. Do you know someone who was a victim of a crime
    No
    Yes, please specify
14. Where do you mainly hear or read about crime?
    Book
    Community
    Family/friends
    General word of mouth
    Government outlets
    Internet
    Newspaper
    Personal experience
    Radio
    School/education outlet
    Television
    Other, please specify