Contemporary Methods of Social Introduction: Is the Stigmatisation justified?

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Abstract

Historically, individuals in search of a romantic partner have expanded their pool of alternatives by meeting others through their personal social networks. In the last few decades, however, a growing singles population, coupled with advances in technology, has promoted the utilisation and modernization of contemporary marriage market intermediaries (MMIs), including online dating sites, social networking sites, and professional matchmaking services. Importantly, these contemporary MMIs depart from more normative methods for meeting others, making their use ripe for social stigmatization, as evidenced by myriad portrayals in the popular media. The purpose of the present research was to provide an empirical exploration of the validity of the layperson stigma towards users of contemporary MMIs by assessing the extent to which users and nonusers of these various services differ on key individual characteristics relevant to relationship initiation and progression. Specifically, we surveyed 96 individuals, all of whom were attending a singles' happy hour, and compared users and nonusers of contemporary MMIs on several important characteristics. Although users reported going on more dates and perceived greater attractiveness in others at the event, no differences were observed in personality (i.e., the Big 5) or adult attachment classification (i.e., secure vs. insecure). Altogether, our findings suggest that users of contemporary MMIs are not socially undesirable people (or at least any more undesirable than nonusers).

Keywords: Social introduction, stigmatisation, matchmaking.

Historically, individuals in search of a romantic partner have expanded their pool of alternatives by meeting others through their personal social networks (e.g., family and friends; Coontz, 2005). These *informal* marriage market intermediaries (MMIs) represent the normative method for obtaining social introductions with potential partners (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992; Sprecher, Schwartz, Harvey, & Hatfield, 2008). In the last few decades, however, a growing singles population, coupled with advances in technology, has promoted the utilisation and modernization of *formal*

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MMIs, henceforth referred to as *contemporary* MMIs. These contemporary MMIs include online dating sites, social networking sites, and professional matchmaking services (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1991). Such contemporary methods of social introduction further allow individuals to expand their social circles and pool of eligible romantic partners by side-stepping familial or fraternal connections. Subsequently, researchers have speculated about the kinds of individuals that use these services and whether the layperson's social stigmatisation of people who capitalise on them is justified (Anderson, 2005; Levine, 2000; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Wildermuth, 2004).

The purpose of the present research was to provide an empirical exploration of the validity of the layperson stigma towards users of contemporary MMIs by assessing the extent to which users and nonusers of these various services differ on key individual characteristics relevant to relationship initiation and progression. Our review focuses first on a description of the various forms of contemporary MMIs. Next, we provide evidence to support the contention that although their use has grown considerably in recent years, causing some to speculate that any stigma associated with contemporary MMIs is waning (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992; Houran, Lange, Rentfrom, & Bruckner, 2004), negative impressions of people who initiate social introductions via these methods remain rampant amongst the general public and popular press (Egan, 2003; Orr, 2004; Tracy, 2006). Finally, we present findings from a survey study that expands previous work on the characteristics of individuals who utilise contemporary MMIs versus those who do not.

Overview of contemporary MMIs

According to Adelman and Ahuvia (1991) any service that provides individuals the ability to search for potential partners, matches individuals with a partner, or brings people together to promote interaction can be broadly construed as an MMI. Contemporary MMIs include both offline and online services, and may or may not exist solely for the purpose of creating romantic matches, but can serve to do so nonetheless (e.g., MySpace).

Offline services. Offline services include professional matchmaking services, speed dating companies, and singles' social events. Each of these commercial organisations base their business models on pairing up like-minded singles who, for any number of reasons, are not able to search the dating scene on their own (e.g., lack of

time). The most well-known of such offline services, It's Just Lunch, matches singles based on face-to-face interviews with matchmakers. This trendy singles' service was founded in 1991 and reports having approximately 30,000 members worldwide (It's Just Lunch, 2008). More recently, speed-dating has gained increasing popularity, with a number of speed-dating services existing (e.g., Hurry Date; 8minuteDating). In a typical speed dating event, individuals who are interested in finding a significant other are paired with several potential partners and given the opportunity to interact for a predetermined amount of time (for an excellent review of the speed dating methodology, see Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews, 2007). Finally, singles' social events include happy hours hosted by various organisations (e.g., radio stations and bars) targeted towards the romantically unattached. Regardless of the format, the objective of these MMIs is to facilitate social introductions by bringing motivated singles together.

Online services. Due to advances in technology, online MMIs are increasing in popularity. Such web-based enterprises include online friend networks like MySpace.com and online matchmaking communities like Match.com. The Pew Internet Project reported that of the approximately 10 million internet users who report that they are single and looking for romantic partners, 74% have turned to the internet in their quest to find a companion (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). In addition, of the 30 million people surveyed by the project, 15% reported that they know someone who has been in a long-term relationship with or married someone they met online; approximately 30% of respondents indicated knowing someone who has 'dabbled' in online dating.

Sites such as MySpace.com and Facebook.com, while not deliberately designed to promote the development of romances, do facilitate romantic relationship initiation. For example, Facebook allows individuals to indicate both their relationship status and availability to others (the user has the option of making that information viewable only to 'friends' or to everyone who utilizes Facebook). MySpace allows users to search for other MySpace users based on specific parameters (e.g., age, location, relationship status), thus functioning similarly to online dating sites. Indeed, a recent survey indicated that approximately 8% of the users surveyed seek romantic partners on MySpace and Facebook (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Thus, although social networking sites serve a broader social function, they certainly facilitate the social introduction of potential romantic partners (albeit computer-mediated).

Whereas, sites like MySpace and Facebook are not solely dedicated to helping individuals meet others, online dating sites exist for such purposes. Online dating has

transformed the relationship initiation process by providing individuals with access to a vast number of potential partners following the simple click of a mouse (DiMaggio, Eszter, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Madden & Lenhart, 2006; Whitty, 2008). Specifically, online daters have access to a far greater number of potential romantic partners than individuals have through more traditional dating methods (Sprecher et al., 2008; Whitty, 2008). Subsequent to its conception, specialised dating sites that target an array of people and interests have evolved, such as sites dedicated to certain minority or religious groups, disabled persons and sexual deviants (Hardey, 2002). Most online dating sites, however, cater to the adult, heterosexual population and typically advertise services that facilitate the pursuit of long-term romantic relationships (Hardey, 2002).

Multiple researchers have documented that relationships initiated through online matchmaking services often advance to offline relationships (Lawson & Leck, 2006; Whitty, 2008; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). For example, one study interviewed people who had utilised an online dating site and found that over half (57.4%) of the participants reported meeting offline within a week or two of meeting online (Whitty, 2008). Online relationships tend to make the transition to an offline relationship once rapport and trust have been established (Baker, 2005; Hardey, 2004). Anecdotal, open-ended interviews with users of online dating sites highlight the importance of users' first offline meeting for determining future interactions (Hardey, 2004; Whitty, 2008).

The social stigma of contemporary MMI users

Empirical literature documenting the characteristics of contemporary methods of social introduction users is scant (Houran et al., 2004; Lawson & Leck, 2002; Mantovani, 2001; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Whitty, 2008; Wildermuth, 2004). One aspect of contemporary MMIs in need of empirical attention concerns the social stigma tied to users of these services. Stigma refers to any individual who possesses attributes that are contrary to and 'less desirable' than the attributes society would anticipate them to possess (Goffman, 1963). In other words, stigmas develop from deviations in social norms. Although the utilisation of contemporary MMIs has increased dramatically in the past few decades, both the general public and popular press regularly treat contemporary MMI users as if they are somehow inadequate or otherwise unable to find a partner through more traditional routes. Thus, despite their popularity, contemporary

MMIs, given their deviation from traditional methods of meeting others (e.g., through friends and family), are a prime target for stigmatisation.

There are at least three reasons this topic should be addressed empirically. First, the presence of a negative stigma may discourage singles from using these services. If any stigma is unfounded, otherwise good people looking for a partner may delay their entry into a romantic relationship because of the limited pool of partners that exist through use of informal MMIs. Given the health benefits provided by participation in a satisfying romantic relationship, such avoidance can have serious implications (Loving , Heffner, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2006). Second, familial and fraternal support for relationships that initiate via use of contemporary MMIs is often deficient, undermining relationship satisfaction (Wildermuth, 2004). Much of the lack of support seen from outsiders is caused by the negative stigma associated with use of contemporary MMIs (Wildermuth, 2004). Thus, given the profound influence impressions of contemporary MMI use has on individual and relationship outcomes, it is imperative to understand whether these impressions are warranted and to make efforts to diminish them if they are not valid. Finally, from an applied perspective, if certain types of people are particularly likely to use contemporary MMIs, then evaluation of their benefits (e.g., creating successful marriages) must be considered in the context of the types of people who do and do not use the service. In other words, without thorough understanding of whether users of contemporary MMIs differ from nonusers, researchers and businesses will be unable to determine whether the ultimate success of partnerships (or lack thereof) created via contemporary services reflect a selection bias or a direct effect of the services themselves (e.g., superior 'matching algorithm'; Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992).

Interestingly, although some research has found that users of contemporary MMIs have more positive characteristics than nonusers (e.g., less shy and higher self esteem; Bernard, Adelman, & Schroeder, 1991), the stigma has survived, and thrived, in the general public. Evidence of this stigma can be found throughout popular literature and the media (Egan, 2003; Tracy, 2006), which is important because portrayals in the media are capable of shaping public attitude (Mastro, 2003). For example, in the blockbuster movie, *You've Got Mail,* Meg Ryan's character, Kathleen, tells Tom Hanks' character, Joe, "I like to start my notes to you as if we're already in the middle of a conversation. I pretend that we're the oldest and dearest friends– as opposed to what we actually are — people who don't know each other's names and met in a chat room

where we both claimed we'd never been before" (Ephron, 1998). Kathleen's comment reveals a blatant effort to distance her and Joe's relationship from the reality that it started online by creating a new reality that is more consistent with traditional social norms. This example complements research that has found that the majority of online daters are reluctant to disclose that they are users of contemporary MMIs (Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt; 2008). More recently, shows such as *One Tree Hill* demonstrate that the stigma tied to contemporary MMI users is still viable (Schwahn & Gillard, 2008). For example, in one scene (Season 6, episode 107, original air date: September 1, 2008), 'Nathan' confides in his friend that he is upset because his mum is "dating some freak she met online". 'Nathan' complains to his friend about how embarrassing it is that his mum would date someone she met on the internet and goes as far as to say that his mother's internet dating is worse than her previous addiction to prescription medications.

Perhaps more importantly, evidence of the stigmatisation of contemporary MMI users can also be found in the empirical literature (Anderson, 2005; Donn & Sherman, 2002; Sprecher et al., 2008; Wildermuth, 2004). For example, the Social Skills Deficiency Model "holds that people join dating services because they have social, psychological, and behavioral deficiencies that prevent them from establishing romantic relationships through conventional channels" (Bernard et al., 1991; p.535). These assumptions reflect the layperson belief that individuals who deviate from more traditional methods of mate selection somehow differ unfavorably from those who take a more contemporary route. Our goal was to provide an empirical examination of whether users and nonusers of contemporary MMIs do differ on key individual characteristics relevant to relationship initiation and progression.

Summary and study overview

We surveyed a convenience sample of individuals who were single and actively interested in finding a romantic partner, all of whom were comfortable attending 'traditional' venues for meeting others (i.e., a bar). We chose to look at three specific features: personality, attachment, and perceptions of attractiveness. These constructs were selected for two reasons: (1) each construct can be assessed with short, validated measures, and (2) each construct has theoretical relevance to the realm of relationship initiation and progression.

Personality. One of the most prominent assumptions about people who utilise contemporary MMIs, online ones in particular, is that users are socially inept because they are unable to maintain a relationship face-to-face and therefore must retreat online to do so (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Wildermuth, 2004). Additionally, personality dispositions can profoundly influence romantic relationship well-being (Donnellan, Conger, & Bryant, 2004; Watson, Hubbard, & Weise, 2000). For example, higher levels of neuroticism have been associated with negative marital interactions and negative evaluations of marital quality. Also, higher levels of extraversion have been associated with greater marital satisfaction (Donnellan et al., 2004; Watson et al., 2000). Thus, knowledge of whether contemporary MMI users and nonusers differ on these dispositions will also contribute to the ability of companies to appropriately evaluate the efficacy of their services by providing some indication of whether people who select to use these services differ from those who do not.

Adult attachment. An individual's orientations towards others can also affect the initiation and progression of romantic relationships (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006). As noted above, users of MMIs are often perceived to be socially anxious people, who are unable to maintain face-to-face relationships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Wildermuth, 2004). Such a stereotype begs the question of whether users of MMIs are less secure in their attachments with close others than are nonusers. Further, one's attachment style is associated both with relationship quality and stability (e.g., Levy & Davis, 1988; Morrison, Goodlin-Jones, & Urquiza, 1997), and influences the development of romances (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). In the early stages of dating, for example, insecurely attached individuals are more likely than securely attached individuals to create dyadic conflict and stress within their romances, subsequently resulting in premature breakups (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006).

Perceived attractiveness. Pop culture references depict users of MMIs as people who are too unattractive to get a date through conventional methods (Ezilon Infobase, 2006; Orr, 2004). For example, in the movie *Hard Candy*, 'Hayley' tells 'Jeff', "You really just don't look like the kind of guy who needs to meet girls over the internet" (Slade, 2005). Physical appearance is indeed a strong predictor of individual success obtaining dates (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). If people perceive users as being unattractive, then individuals may be less likely to use MMI services because (a) they believe they are too attractive to resort to such activities, or (b) they anticipate that any

potential partners would be below the minimum level of attractiveness they require in a partner. Therefore, stigma that users of MMIs are unattractive would influence whether someone opts whether or not to utilise such services.

Method

Design overview and participants

Data for this project were collected as part of a pilot study designed to investigate the characteristics of individuals who utilise contemporary social introduction methods (henceforth referred to as *users*) versus those who do not (i.e., *nonusers*). The participants were attendants at one of several 'singles' parties in a large southwestern city. The parties were coordinated by an American company that hosts singles' happy hours geared towards working professionals in their late twenties to thirties. Data for this paper were collected at three of the company's singles' happy hours.

Participants included two types of attendants: (1) those who sought out to attend a singles' sanctioned event (i.e., received an electronic invitation, invited by a friend who received an electronic invitation, learned about it from the party's' website) and (2) those who by chance happened to notice the social event occurring or were already patrons at the bar hosting the event. Participants were approached during the parties by the first author or a trained research assistant and asked to complete a brief, anonymous survey. Alternatively, participants could complete the survey at a booth designed to attract respondents by advertising data collection efforts. Participants were not compensated for participating in the study and every attendant at the party had the opportunity to complete one of the surveys.

A total of 146 individuals completed the brief survey. Of these respondents, 90 participants reported they were single, 17 reported they were in a serious relationship but not married, 8 reported they were married, 20 reported they were divorced, and 1 reported he or she was separated (10 respondents declined to respond). Only respondents selecting a relationship status of single, divorced, or separated were included in our analyses. This criterion was instituted to ensure that the analyses included only individuals not involved in a romantic relationship. Additionally,

respondents must have indicated what strategies they currently use to find potential romantic partners. These inclusion criteria resulted in a final sample of 96 completed surveys, with any reductions in degrees of freedom resulting from missing data on a dependent variable.

The final sample consisted of 43 men and 53 women. The mean age of respondents was 31.9 years ($SD = 5.87$). The sample consisted primarily of Caucasians (75.0%; 8.3% Hispanic; 5.2% African American; 6.3% Asian or Pacific Islanders; 3.1% 'other'). The sample was comprised of people with various religious denominations (18.8% Protestant; 18.8% Roman Catholic; 2.1% Baptist; 3.1% Jewish; 15.6% Nondenominational; 13.5% Agnostic/Atheist; 16.5% None; 11.5% other). Approximately half (46.9%) of respondents indicated they were 'somewhat religious' (6.3% 'very religious'; 25.0% 'not very religious'; 20.8% 'not at all religious'). The sample was highly educated with 84.4% of respondents reporting having a minimum of a college degree, with only 25.3% of respondents reporting an income of under $40,000/yr before deductions. Professionally, 29.2% of the sample reported that they were employed in the business sector (8.3% government; 1% medical; 8.3% sales; 5.2% legal; 5.2% education; 10.4% student; 32.3% other). Of the 96 total respondents, 8 people indicated that they had children.

Measures

Our survey was designed to be succinct because the data was being collected at a bar and we anticipated that the attention span of participants would be especially short due to the nature of the environment. As a result, we utilised brief measures of established constructs demonstrated to be either associated with romantic relationship outcomes or negative stereotypes of users of contemporary matchmaking services, including personality, attachment orientation, and perceived attractiveness.

Utilisation of contemporary methods of matchmaking. One forced choice item asked respondents how they currently find their dates. Respondents were presented with 9 options and instructed to select all those that applied to them (i.e., through friends, the supermarket, through family, sports/recreational groups, local dating services (i.e., It's Just Lunch), online dating services (i.e., Match.com), online friend networks (i.e., MySpace), professional societies/clubs, other). Participants were considered users of contemporary MMIs if they indicated using one of three methods: (1) local dating

services, (2) online dating services, or (3) online friend networks. Twenty-seven participants indicated that in their search for a mate they take advantage of local dating services (e.g., It's Just Lunch, $n = 5$), online friend networks (e.g., MySpace, $n = 7$), and/or online dating services (e.g., Match.com, $n = 23$), with some participants selecting multiple services. These respondents comprise our users of contemporary MMIs. Respondents who did not indicate utilising these services comprised the nonusers ($n = 69$). Consistent with extant work (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), individuals in the users group ($M = 34.85$, $SD = 6.56$) were significantly older than nonusers ($M = 30.68$, $SD = 5.16$), $t(93) = 3.29$, $p < .001$. Users also reported having more dates per month ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.46$) than did nonusers ($M = 1.12$, $SD = 1.31$), $t(92) = 2.71$, $p < .01$.

Personality. We assessed personality with Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann's (2003) validated Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI), which assesses the classic Big Five personality traits (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness) via two pairs of adjectives that reflect each trait. Specifically, participants are presented with a series of adjective pairs (e.g., critical, quarrelsome) and asked to "write a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement" on a 1 (*Disagree strongly*) to 7 (*Agree strongly*) scale. Each trait is assessed by participant responses to two sets of adjective pairs, responses to which are averaged. Detailed information regarding the validity and reliability of the TIPI can be found in Gosling et al. (2003).

Adult attachment orientation. Although the field has moved towards assessment of adult attachment at the continuous level (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) we utilised the classic Hazan and Shaver (1987) measure of attachment because of time constraints. This three-item forced-choice measure of attachment allows participants to self-identify as secure, anxious, or avoidant. Participants were asked to choose which of the three items best describes their feelings about getting close to another person. Of our sample of 96 respondents, 70 participants indicated they were securely attached, 20 selected the avoidant description, and 2 selected the anxious description (4 respondents declined to respond). Because of the low number of anxious respondents, we collapsed across the two insecure descriptions to distinguish secure from insecure respondents (Users: 21 secure, 5 insecure, 1 did not answer; Nonusers: 49 secure, 17 insecure, 3 did not answer).

Attractiveness. We asked participants to indicate their own level of physical attractiveness as well as the perceived level of attractiveness of others at the party (1 = *very unattractive*; 10 = *very attractive*).

Results

Personality

Means and standard deviations of dependent variables can be found in Table 1. Results for personality dimensions were analyzed using one-way MANOVA, between groups design. The overall multivariate effect was nonsignificant, Wilks' lambda = 0.93, $F(5, 90) = 1.45$, *ns*.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Personality and Perceived Attractiveness

	Users		Nonusers	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Personality				
Extraversion	5.91	1.05	5.75	0.87
Agreeableness	5.83	0.84	5.43	0.93
Conscientiousness	5.85	0.93	5.94	0.91
Emotional stability	5.72	0.81	5.66	0.75
Openness	6.33	0.83	6.12	0.73
Physical Attractiveness				
Self	7.74	1.16	7.65	1.42
Others	7.24	1.42	6.48	1.55

Adult Attachment

A chi-square analyses was conducted to test whether users and nonusers differed in their attachment security classifications. There were no differences in the classification of individuals as secure versus insecure as a function of user status, $\chi^2 (91) = 0.44$, *ns*.

Physical Attractiveness

Although perceptions of participant's own physical attractiveness did not differ as a function of user status ($t(93) = 0.30$, *ns*), users did rate other attendees at the party

as more attractive ($M = 7.24$, $SD = 1.42$) than did nonusers ($M = 6.48$, $SD = 1.55$), ($t(88) = 2.14$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

In today's busy society, individuals are often forced to resort to creative means when attempting to meet potential romantic partners. A growing singles population, coupled with advances in technology, has promoted the widespread use of what we refer to as *contemporary* marriage market intermediaries (MMIs), including online dating sites, social networking sites, and professional matchmaking services. Importantly, the characteristics of individuals who use contemporary MMIs relative to those who avoid such methods have not received much empirical scrutiny. Because the majority of published work offers mostly qualitative descriptions of people who use contemporary MMIs or reviews of the various processes they involve (e.g., how do people create online dating profiles?), negative stigmatisations of users relative to nonusers have been allowed to flourish. In this research, we offer a preliminary look into whether the stigmatisation of users of contemporary MMIs is warranted.

Users of these services reported having significantly more dates per month than did nonusers. It is obvious that individuals who utilise offline matchmaking services like It's Just Lunch should experience more dating activity for that is the premise of the service. This finding also makes sense for users of online methods because many relationships that begin online naturally evolve to the offline world (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). For example, in a study by Whitty (2008), more than half of participants who engaged in online dating met their partner face-to-face within a week or two of meeting online. Mathematically, the more methods individuals utilise to meet partners, the more likely they are to actually meet and ultimately date others. Thus, users are simply expanding their pool of eligible alternatives by taking advantage of contemporary MMIs (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

We also assessed users' and nonusers' perceptions of their own and others' attractiveness. Although there is some evidence that users tend to inflate their own attractiveness (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001), we found no support for this contention. However, our results indicate that users of contemporary MMIs may rate others as more physically attractive than do nonusers. This is a particularly interesting finding with two alternative interpretations. First, perhaps people who use contemporary MMIs have a

more realistic sense of available levels of physical attractiveness in the singles' market because they have more exposure to the status quo of available singles (as a function of their more frequent dating). Alternatively, users may further increase their pool of alternatives by lowering their standards for what constitutes acceptable levels of physical attractiveness. Admittedly, these ideas are speculative and await future research.

Other than the differences in number of dates and perceptions of others' attractiveness, users and nonusers were generally indistinguishable. First, a multivariate test of differences in the Big-Five Personality domains revealed no differences. The lack of differences lie in stark contrast to suggestions that people who utilise contemporary MMIs are different than people who do not use them (Orr, 2004), at least in terms of personality. Rather, individuals who use these methods do not appear to have less desirable personalities or personality flaws. Second, and consistent with the general lack of differences in personality, we did not observe any differences in attachment security between users and nonusers. Both stable individual characteristics like personality and individual orientations towards others can have a profound influence on the initiation and maintenance of romantic relationships (for a review see Simpson, Winterheld, & Chen, 2006). Our null findings suggest that popular press portrayals and public opinion that people who use contemporary MMIs have inherent personality flaws mischaracterises reality.

Our findings must be considered in light of some limitations of the study. First, given the nature of our sample, our study questionnaire was designed such that it could be completed easily and quickly. Although we would have preferred to assess more constructs and utilise more advanced measures of those constructs, any study must balance theoretical and practical concerns. The short two-page survey allowed us to avoid fatiguing participants given they certainly had their minds on other activities. As a result, however, our results should be interpreted with caution. Additionally, our sample was by no means a representative sample; we studied a group of people who were attending a singles party. We cannot be certain that our findings generalize to others who do and do not use these services, especially given the high SES characteristics of respondents.

That said, we believe our select sample comprises one of the more unique aspects of the study. Specifically, we studied a group of individuals who are actively involved in the dating market. To our knowledge, few empirical studies have utilized

such a 'real world' sample in a 'real world' setting. Therefore, our sample captures singles "in the midst of initial acquaintanceship, or even before they have noticed each other, something that is difficult to do even with convenient human subject pools in psychology" (Sprecher et al., 2008, p.262). However, because our sample was surveyed at bars we cannot generalize our results to individuals who would not socialize at such establishments; future work should address this segment of the population.

Altogether, our findings suggest that users of contemporary MMIs are not socially undesirable people (or at least any more undesirable than nonusers). Admittedly, we do not delude ourselves into presuming that the results of this preliminary investigation will eradicate the stigma that has remained pervasive in the general public. However, we believe that over time, as more studies regarding the characteristics of those who do and do not use contemporary MMIs are published, the negative stigma will continue to diminish. Such a trend has the potential to significantly influence relationship outcomes given the effect such stigmas have on familial and fraternal support for newly-initiated romances.

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