

Perceptions of Stigma in Online Dating Narratives:
Implications for Marriage and Family Therapists

Dana F. Riger

Dissertation submitted to the faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and
State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Human Development

Fred P. Piercy, Chair

Katherine R. Allen

Rosemary Blieszner

Peggy S. Meszaros

April 28, 2017

Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: online dating, stigma, symbolic interactionism, narrative therapy, courtship stories,
meeting online, marriage and family therapy

Perceptions of Stigma in Online Dating Narratives:
Implications for Marriage and Family Therapists

Dana F. Riger

Abstract

Despite the popularity and widespread usage of online dating platforms, general perceptions of online dating remain largely stigmatized. While narratives of online daters as nerdy, desperate, and socially inept were prominent in the platform's infancy (Whitty & Carr, 2006; Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007), narratives of online daters today are different but still largely stigmatized. In the current study, through an open-ended online survey, perceptions of stigma were explored in the online dating narratives of 110 participants who met their partners online within the past five years. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was used as a qualitative methodological approach to identify and illustrate themes across participants' perceptions. The resulting themes revealed the following: (a) a general stigma about online dating persists; (b) online dating narratives are shared more honestly and completely with trustworthy audiences; (c) intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation markedly influence how online dating narratives are shared; (d) a perceived hierarchy of legitimacy exists amongst online dating platforms; and (e) the benefits of meeting a partner online often outweigh the stigma of online dating. Symbolic interactionism was used as a theoretical framework to explore meaning in participants' responses and interpret the social interaction shaping meaning. Narrative therapy was also used as a theoretical framework to guide the clinical conceptualization of themes and create suggestions for therapists working with clients who date online. Lastly, suggestions for competencies in online relationship culture are made for marriage and family therapy training programs.

Perceptions of Stigma in Online Dating Narratives:
Implications for Marriage and Family Therapists

Dana F. Riger

General Audience Abstract

Despite widespread usage and popularity of online dating platforms, general perceptions of online dating remain largely stigmatized. In the current study, perceptions of stigma were explored in the narratives of 110 participants who met their partners online. The resulting themes revealed that: (a) a general stigma about online dating persists; (b) online dating narratives are shared more honestly and completely with a trustworthy audience; (c) intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation markedly influence how online dating narratives are shared; (d) a perceived hierarchy of legitimacy exists amongst platforms; and (e) the benefits of meeting online often outweigh the stigma of online dating. Using narrative therapy as a theoretical framework, clinical suggestions for therapists working with clients who date online were made. Suggestions for competency training in online relationship culture were also made for marriage and family therapy training programs.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to the loving memory of Dr. Peggy Meszaros. “Dr. M” taught me a great deal about professional development, thriving as a woman in academia, and thinking broadly about issues that affect couples and families. She made me feel seen, empowered, and valuable. It was with a deep sense of sorrow that I moved forward with this work throughout her illness. However, it was with the vivid memory of her exemplary spirit that I pushed forward and strove to make her proud. Thank you, Dr. M, for helping to pave the way for me and for so many women and family studies scholars.

Acknowledgments

Over the past four years, I have received a tremendous amount of support and encouragement from a great number of individuals at Virginia Tech. Firstly, I want to thank Dr. Fred Piercy, who has been a mentor to me in more ways than he knows. His guidance, both personally and professionally, has made my doctoral experience more rewarding than I could have hoped. I am grateful to have worked with him and learned from him.

I want to thank Dr. Katherine Allen, whose impact on my experience at Virginia Tech has been immeasurable. First as my teaching mentor, and then as my committee member and qualitative research guru, Dr. Allen's encouragement and belief in me has impacted my development as a scholar and teacher in a myriad of ways. I am eternally grateful to her for the many hours she spent thoughtfully and artfully critiquing my work and pushing me to develop deeper meanings in my data. Her humor, indelible presence, and commitment to social justice and feminist principles will stay with me always.

I would like to thank Dr. Rosemary Blieszner, who has also been a constant source of support throughout my time at Virginia Tech. She challenged me to reach a deeper understanding of theory and pushed me to consider how my scholarship directly benefits others. I would also like to thank Dr. Anisa Zvonkovic for championing me throughout my time at Virginia Tech and for stepping onto my committee as proxy during difficulty times and providing extremely insightful feedback.

I want to thank my first Chair and Advisor, Dr. Scott Johnson, whose impact on my development as an academic, clinician and supervisor, and as a human being, has been significant in so many fundamental ways. I am grateful to him for valuing my most authentic self, challenging me to look at my self-as-therapist, and teaching me to always question Truth.

He helped me to become a systemic thinker and taught me to how to consider and account for the historical and cultural context of knowledge.

I want to thank Chrystal McDowell for her assistance on the analysis of this paper and for her insights and congeniality. I would also like to thank my cohort: Jamie West, Yesim Keskin, Kendra O’Hora, Emily Haugen, and Tina Voskonova, for being one of the most amazingly supportive, intelligent, funny, and warm groups of women I have had the privilege of knowing, learning from, and being inspired by. I also want to thank Renu Aldrich for her amazing support and feedback over the years, Kasey Richardson for always volleying research ideas with me and being an amazing study buddy, Jessica Stephen for her consistent encouragement, and Ruth Nutting for her positivity and confidence in me. Thank you also to my best friends back home in New York: Vanessa Miceli, Liat Ron, Jill Hopman, Jenny Guerrerio, and Sarah Cardell. Having a support network of amazingly kind and strong women got me through the often lonely and arduous writing process and motivated me to forge ahead.

Lastly, and most importantly, I want to thank my family. Studying families and working with families as a clinician over the last six years has made me realize how incredibly fortunate I am to have parents who have shown me unconditional love and support. Thank you to my mother, Janet Riger, who made me believe that I was powerful, that I could do anything I put mind to. Without her confidence in me and constant support, I would have not been able to pursue my dreams. I want to thank my father, Henry Riger, who has always shown me unwavering support and love. His faith in me and his sacrifices have made this journey possible. Thank you also to my stepparents, Joan Kase and Art Brickman, not only for making my parents’ lives more fulfilled, but for your support of me as well. To my aunts and uncles, and to my grandma Ruth, thank you for your love and encouragement. I want to thank my best friend, my

sister Abby Riger, for being my biggest supporter; I am driven to always make her proud. Thank you to my amazingly supportive brother, Lee Riger, and sister-in-law, Stephanie Riger, for always encouraging me and being there for me, and for blessing me with the most amazing nephew. I feel more driven now to make the world a place where Sammy can thrive.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Background	2
Contemporary online dating	4
Theoretical Framework	10
Symbolic interactionism	10
Current study	12
Clinical Framework	13
Narrative therapy	13
Role of therapist	15
Current study	15
Statement of the Problem	16
Stigma	16
Shame	20
Purpose of the Study	21
Research Questions	22
Definition of Terms	24
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature	27
Romantic Relationship Formation	27
Online Relationship Formation	29
Communicating through technology	29
Online dating	30
Attributes	35
Online spaces	37
Filtering strategies	38
Impression management	40
Risk and deception	41
Initiation Narratives	42
Online initiation	43
Family influence	45
Chapter 3: Research Methods	46
Qualitative Paradigm	46
Recruitment	47

Participants	49
Demographics	50
The researchers	51
Data Sources and Collection	51
Data Analysis	56
Familiarization with the data	58
Generating initial codes	58
Searching codes for themes	60
Reviewing themes	61
Defining and naming themes	62
Producing a final report	62
Rigor	63
Credibility	63
Transferability	64
Dependability	65
Chapter 4: Results	68
General Stigma Persists	69
Sharing story	71
Trusted Audience	72
Embracing or concealing story	77
Social environments	80
Intersections of Identity	81
Platform Hierarchy	87
Benefits of Meeting Online	88
Chapter 5: Discussion	91
Symbolic Interactionism	91
General Stigma Persists	93
Shame	93
Family influence	94
Trusted Audience	95
Generational divide	95
Intersection of Identities	97
Race and ethnicity	98

Education and social class.	98
Platform Hierarchy	99
Benefits of Meeting Online	100
Reflexivity	101
Narrative Therapy	102
Externalize.	104
Unique outcomes.	105
Not knowing.	106
Deconstruction and reconstruction.	107
Suggestions for MFTs	108
Cultural competency.	108
Self-of-therapist.	109
Implications	110
Chapter 6: Conclusion	112
Limitations	113
Future Research	114
References	116
Appendix A	137
Appendix B	140
Appendix C	143
Appendix D	146
Appendix E	147

Perceptions of Stigma in Online Dating Narratives:
Implications for Marriage and Family Therapists

Chapter 1: Introduction

Americans are getting married later, living longer than ever, and experiencing longer periods of singlehood. In 1959, the average age of first marriage was 20.2 for American women and 22.5 for American men (U.S. Census, 2016). In 2016, the average age of first marriage was 27.4 for women and 29.5 for men, the highest recorded ages in U.S. Census history (U.S. Census, 2016). Life expectancies have also been increasing consistently across the world in the past century (World Health Organization, 2016). In 1900, the average life expectancies (at birth) for the entire population (all races) was 46.3 for American men and 48.3 for American women (Center for Disease Control, 2015). In 2014, the average life expectancy was 76.4 for American men and 81.2 for American women (Center for Disease Control, 2015). By some estimates, average life expectancies for Americans in 2050 will be 89-94 for women and 83-86 for men (MacArthur Foundation, 2009).

For the first time in the history of the United States, there are also more single adults between the ages of 18 and 35 than married adults (U.S. Census, 2012). More Americans have also never been married. In 1980, at its lowest point in a century, less than 6% of American women over 35 were never married, and just over 6% of men reported never having been married (U.S. Census, 2010). In 2010, approximately 27% of women and 28% of men over 35 were never married, the highest rates in record U.S. Census history (U.S. Census, 2010).

While there are more single older adults than ever before, there are still far more single women than men in the United States, particularly among older adults. In 2016, for the entire population, 34% of men 65-74, 27.2% of men 75-84, and 42% of men 85 and older were single,

and 43.5% of women 65-74, 58.5% of women 75-84, and 82.8% of women 85 and older were single (U.S. Census, 2016). The term *single* in this data was used to describe individuals who were widowed, divorced, separated or never married adults. Thus, periods of singlehood in general, and particularly for older women, are increasing. Longer periods of singlehood likely mean longer periods of dating, and Americans are increasingly turning online to date.

Background

In the 18th century, matrimonial agencies ran personal ads in local newspapers on behalf of bachelors seeking wives (Cocks, 2009). While ads or “adverts” were said to have moderate success, utilizing them attracted criticism and stigma. They were seen as a last resort for single people past an acceptable age, and were generally not discussed if they resulted in a union (Cocks, 2009). In the Victorian period, those who utilized personal ads were also suspected of being deceptive, perverse, or dangerous (Cocks, 2009). Matrimonial ads placed to find a new “sweetheart” were generally run in “problem columns” in penny magazines and papers (Phegley, 2011, p. 79). While many publications proudly printed them, others outright rejected the concept of matrimonial ads as immoral. One editor, in response to a request to place a matrimonial ad, said to a reader:

If you were a ‘constant’ reader of our publication, you would have seen that on many occasions we have declared that we will not insert matrimonial advertisements, and that we have determined them as immoral and indelicate to a degree. No respectable young man would take unto himself a wife through such a medium (Phegley, 2011, p. 79).

During industrialization, young people increasingly moved into more urban areas and upset traditional systems of courtships that once relied on local social networks. Single adults were spending time at work or away from home and finding it hard to meet partners (Phegley,

2011). Some feared that traditional courtship was increasingly outdated; matrimonial ads looked like a solution to the difficulties of modern courtship by filling the social role ordinarily assumed by family and church or other community-based systems (Phegley, 2011).

With the invention of the telegraph in the mid 19th century, electronic communication came to take shape. Advances in electronic communication influenced the way partnerships were formed and maintained the world over. In the early 20th century, personal ads became slightly more mainstream and less stigmatized, largely due to their popularity among lonely technicians in World War I (Cocks, 2009). In the late 20th century, computer technology shifted the dating landscape significantly as personal ads become computerized. In 1965, Operation Match, the first computer dating service in the United States, was launched by Harvard students who were unhappy with traditional dating systems (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). For a small fee, customers could fill out and mail in a questionnaire about their personal characteristics and dating preferences. Responses were then manually punched into cards, processed using a computer, and a list of the names and numbers of matches was then sent to customers to use as they saw fit.

The late 1970s saw the introduction of personal computers into American homes and connecting to others electronically became much easier and more mainstream. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, people were able to connect electronically to multiple others in real time. There was a rise in usage of MUDs (Best & Delmege, 2011), originally referring to *Multi-User Dungeons*, now it refers to any *Multi-User Dimension* or *Domain*. MUDs are spaces where multiple users can connect electronically in a real-time, virtual world and generally include roleplaying interactive fiction, and chat rooms. Social virtual worlds like *Second Life* and

strategic life simulation games like *The Sims* were also considered an extension of MUDs (Castronova, 2006).

MUDs evolved alongside Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), which included online role-playing games wherein large numbers of players interact virtually (e.g. *World of Warcraft*). In these spaces, users can intentionally meet for *virtual dating*, which involves the use of avatars. Programs specifically focused on virtual dating include Weopia and Omnidate. Players in MMORPGs may also engage in *cybersex* and use several embedded online tools to enhance their cyber-sexual experiences (Valkyrie, 2011). In these spaces, users tend to have significant control over the aspects of their identity they choose to reveal. Pseudo-anonymity in these types of online spaces has been shown to shift individual and social boundaries (Suler, 2004). Users communicate through their imagination and the rules of face-to-face communication become irrelevant, allowing for more frequent or spontaneous self-disclosures (Suler, 2004).

Contemporary online dating. At the turn of the 21st twentieth century, online dating sites like Match.com (in 1995) and eHarmony (in 2000) emerged. Match.com began as a pilot project for a classified advertising system for newspapers and developed into the largest online dating site in the world, with a record 42 million registered users and 12 million active users (Guinness World Records, 2004). In order to build up its initial database, users were given free lifetime memberships. The site also owed much of its initial success to its focus and inclusion of diverse communities and market leaders in online environments, including women, technology professionals, and the LGBTQ community (Angwin, 1998). To reach this market, the site emphasized privacy and de-emphasized photos. Founder Gary Kremen said, “People will feel

comfortable if they can have an anonymous conversation before meeting in person.” (Angwin, 1998, para. 15).

Clinical psychologist and Evangelical Christian Neil Clark Warren founded the dating site eHarmony, a popular service that focuses on long-term relationships. Warren and his colleagues developed a model of compatibility based on theories that certain characteristics predicted relationship compatibility and satisfaction (Buckwalter, Carter, Forgatch, Parsons, Warren, 2004; Buckwalter, Carter, Forgatch, Parsons, Warren, 2008). Users on this site are initially asked to complete a questionnaire about their personalities, interests, and beliefs, and then matching algorithms, based on commonality, match users believed to be compatible (Buckwalter et al., 2004; Buckwalter et al., 2008). While the site currently has over 20 million active users (eHarmony, 2017), and has enjoyed considerable success, to date, no known independent studies of eHarmony's methods or success rates have been published. Membership rates, retention rates, and time spent on the site had significantly decreased at points in the last couple of years primarily due to increased competition and eHarmony's involvement in numerous lawsuits charging the company with discrimination based on sexual orientation (Gordon, 2010; Wells, 2015). However, the service continues to evolve alongside other platforms by working to become more mobile and customizable.

Craigslist, a private non-profit online classifieds website and app, began in 1995 as an email distribution list about local events in San Francisco. The list became a web-based service in 1996, expanded to other U.S. cities in 2000, and now covers 70 countries. Craigslist is the largest online classifieds site in the world and is currently the 15th most popular website in the United States (Alexa, 2017). The Craigslist's personals section became a popular place to initiate dating and sexual activity because personal ads were free, and gave users a certain amount of

control over anonymity not otherwise found on traditional dating sites. For example, users do not have static profiles that other users can visit; no membership or commitment is required.

Craigslist was particularly embraced by the LGBT community because of the service's free and open nature, and its ability to keep users anonymous (Rostow, 2005). Personal ads have historically been useful for members of the LGBT community to meet potential mates or lovers, as homosexuality was historically illegal in many more places than it is today (Cocks, 2009; Phegley, 2011). Craigslist makes meeting people from diverse background and interests relatively easy, and has been called a “panacea for people who have difficulty meeting people for dating, interpersonal, or intimate encounters” (Rosenbaum, Daunt, & Jiang, 2013, p. 506). Craigslist hosts over 60 million personal ads a year (Craigslist, 2011), and allows users to post personal ads in sections ranging from “strictly platonic” to “miscellaneous romance” to “casual encounters” (Craigslist, 2017).

According to *Online Dating Magazine* (2013), more than 2,500 online dating services exist in the U.S. alone, with 1,000 new services starting every year. The proliferation of online dating services has increased competition in the industry, and pushed companies to develop more mobile and specialized platforms. In the late 2000s, with the launch of Apple’s App Store, mobile applications saw a surge in development, and dating services took notice. Not only were traditional online dating sites creating more mobile platforms and refining their mobile services, some brands, like Tinder, offer services that are *solely* accessible through mobile applications. Clearly, the future of online dating is mobile.

Online dating services are also increasingly focused on providing niche experiences through a “smaller-community mindset” (Davis, 2013). Niche platforms based on age, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, sexual lifestyle, political orientation, and many other

categories and preferences have increased in the new millennium. For example, users interested in dating within certain religious pools can choose from sites like ChristianMingle, JDate, Muslima, or DharmaMatch. Preferences for certain racial or ethnic groups can be satisfied on sites like BlackPeopleMeet, LatinoPeopleMeet, and AsianDating. Sites like OurTime and SeniorPeopleMeet were developed for older adults, sites like LoveMore for polyamorous individuals, and sites like BDSMU and ABFSingles (Adult Breast Feeding) for adults with preferences for varied sexual lifestyles. Sites are even tailored to help users meet politically like-minded people, for example sites LiberalHearts and the newly (albeit tragically) launched, TrumpSingles.

In the 2010s, online dating apps have also increasingly come to rely on *swipe-based* features, wherein the user dragging their finger across the screen of their mobile device makes a swiping motion or gesture. For example, users can *swipe* a photo of a potential match either left or the right, indicating whether they like a potential match or not. Swipe-matching apps, like Tinder, were developed to create a simplified dating app that focuses on images (Grigoriadis, 2014). Tinder users are given a limited number of photos (6) and words (500) to present themselves on their profile. If a match is made (which happens when two users swipe right on each other's photos), users are alerted to the match and direct messaging between users is enabled. At that point, either user can initiate conversation should they choose to.

Tinder was unique among swipe-matching apps in that it required users to link their profile to their Facebook account. This was Tinder's attempt to reassure users that they had connections in common with their potential matches, to ensure some measure of safety (David & Cambre, 2016). However, despite the app's social-linking component, and its more simplified and mobile format, people still have negative perceptions of apps like Tinder. An assessment of

online commentary about Tinder conducted by David and Cambre (2016) revealed negative perceptions and narratives about the app. The review revealed that the immense amounts of media dedicated to documenting negative experiences on Tinder (e.g. documenting awkward, distasteful, or offensive experiences on social media accounts like TinderNightmares) largely contribute to a less than favorable narrative of the app (David & Cambre, 2016).

Grindr, the first and largest geo-based dating app geared towards gay and bisexual men, was launched in 2009. The app allows users to locate nearby men by searching through a grid of photos organized by distance. Grindr (2015) argues it has “supplanted the gay bar”, and online dating sites, as the best way for gay men to meet (para. 1). Grindr has more than 7 million monthly active users in 196 countries, and is the largest all-male mobile social network in the world (Grindr, 2015; Parks-Ramag, 2016). There are divergent perceptions of Grindr in the gay community. Woo (2015) contends, “Some men proudly declare that they don’t use it—or any of the apps like it—as a badge of honor, whereas others are fierce champions for the app.” (para. 5.).

HER, released in 2013 under the name Dattch (date and catch), claims to be the first dating app created specifically and solely for queer, bisexual, and lesbian women. Prior to HER’s launch, other sites and apps catering to queer, bisexual and lesbian women often imitated existing straight or gay-male apps, for example Brenda had been called “Grindr for lesbians” (Margolis, 2014, para 2.) HER’s founder, Robyn Exton, explained why she created a platform tailored for women: “All of the online platforms for women were just reskins¹ of sites built for gay men but turned pink, asking you how much body hair you had, or straight sites that were

¹ Originally referring to the replacement or repair of the skin of an aircraft or motor vehicle, the term is now used colloquially to refer to modifying an existing computer interface in a way that makes it more personal or applicable to its current owner's style.

filled with guys asking you for a threesome” (Moss, 2016, para. 13). HER accounts for the differences in online dating behaviors seen between men and women. In addition to matching services, HER includes articles, details of local events, and a section for group chats. The app is based on the Pinterest model, which allows users to create a “personality mood board” of photos of things users like, revealing a more complete sense of who someone is (Margolis, 2014, para 4.). While apps geared towards lesbians exist, and are on the rise, empirical research on queer, bisexual and lesbian women’s experiences with mobile dating is almost non-existent. As well, research is scant on the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals.

Finally, dating apps are now attempting to challenge gendered behaviors of romantic initiation. While men initiate the majority of online communication on dating sites (Kreager et al., 2014), apps like Bumble hoped to empower women to control their dating lives. Bumble (2015), a dating and social discovery app that only permits women to initiate communication with potential matches, has been called the “feminist Tinder” (Yashari, 2015). Bumble’s founder, Whitney Wolfe, argued that men feel pressure to initiate conversations on dating apps, and women feel pressure to wait for men to initiate (Yashari, 2015). She argues that “If we can take some of the pressure off the man and put some of that encouragement in the woman’s lap, I think we are taking a step in the right direction” (Yashari, 2015. para. 7). Bumble also allows same-sex connections, but in such cases, either person can initiate contact.

Clearly, online dating systems have evolved and organized into a variety of platforms. They have developed to account for users’ personal preferences and desire to control their privacy and anonymity. They have also evolved to make it easier for users to meet potential partners in close proximity through geo-based features. They have also begun to disrupt the very nature of gendered mate selection patterns. With no signs of slowing down, it is clear that online

platforms are the vehicles through which people will increasingly meet their partners in the future. However, research does not provide much insight into the ways people make meaning of meeting a partner online, nor has it explored the way people share their stories of meeting partner online.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks carry assumptions about the nature of the data, what they represent in terms of the world and social realities. Theoretical frameworks used to examine online relationships have included social cognition frameworks, social exchange theories, and symbolic interactionism. Social cognition frameworks have been used to examine people's subjective meanings with online romantic relationships, and to explore the relational schemata people construct about their online relationships (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). The social exchange perspective has been used to understand the development of computer-mediated relationships, highlighting online daters' fundamental tendency to seek positive rewards (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). This perspective has also been used to describe online relationships in terms of the "market metaphor", describing online daters as people who exchange their assets for equal or higher levels of social desirability (Heino, Ellison & Gibbs, 2010).

Symbolic interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) was developed in the sociological tradition and assumes that language and symbols shape meaning and interactions. This theory serves as the foundation for models of qualitative inquiry such as grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Symbolic interactionism is primarily a theory that focuses on the connection between symbols and interactions (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). A symbolic interactionist approach to research avoids reductionism and provides a framework to understand

the process of constructed reality and role formation. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the importance of in-depth knowledge and aids in clearly defining concepts and avoiding vagueness.

The principles of symbolic interactionism were influenced by many disciplines, including evolutionary biology and sociology. Darwinian theories of adaption first explained behavior as resulting from interacting with others and their environment. Darwin (1859) first argued that we adapt to the perceived roles and identities we form through interactions with our environment. Charles Horton Cooley (1902), an American sociologist, later developed the concept of the “looking glass self”, proposing that people grow through social interaction, their perceptions of others, and their perception of society. George Herbert Mead (1934), a pragmatist, later explained the role of social objectivity and shared meaning on self-perception, emphasizing the subjective meaning of behavior (both overt and covert) and social interaction and the use of language to construct reality. Pragmatic principles, holding that reality is constructed and that one "true reality" does not exist, significantly influenced the development of symbolic interactionism as well (Mead, 1934).

Herbert Blumer (1969), another sociologist, first coined the term "symbolic interactionism" and argued that people act toward things based on meanings derived from social interaction and interpretation. Goffman (1959) also contributed significantly to the development of the theory and explained individual behavior as active and reflective. He also described how self-concept is affected by social stigma and the labels people assign (Goffman, 1959).

The basic principles of symbolic interactionism are: (a) humans possess the capacity for thought, shaped by social interaction, (b) meanings and symbols are learned through social interaction, and (c) people can interpret meanings and symbols through their environment (LaRossa, 1993). Symbolic interactionism seeks to explain how people create symbolic worlds,

and how those worlds shape behavior; how identity develops through social interaction and how values are assessed and assigned. Blumer (1969) defined the core principles of the theory: (a) people acting toward things based on meanings they ascribe and (b) meaning is derived from social interaction.

In this theoretical view, symbolic content constantly changes, and new meanings continually arise. Meaning is central to human behavior and negotiated through symbols and language, interpreted by a sense-making thought processes. LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) explain that we act based on meanings that arise from social interactions, that identity is derived from social interaction, and identity provides motivation for behavior. A symbolic interactionist approach seeks to understand how people create symbolic worlds, and how those worlds shape behavior. In this view, meaning is managed through an interpretative process and is central in human behavior (Blumer, 1969).

Current study. Symbolic interactionism has been used to explore linguistic and symbolic markers of relationship boundaries online, exploring how couples achieve closeness and create joint narratives or “socio-mental spaces” that help to enhance and define intimacy and space (Kolozsvari, 2015, p.103). Symbolic interactionism has also been used as a theoretical framework to examine how communication through new media technologies generates new forms of social interaction (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004). The theory has also been used as a framework to explore the role of race and culture on interaction patterns in computer-mediated communication (Bellamy & Greenfield, 2009).

In the current study, I used symbolic interactionism as a guiding theory to understand the interpretive and interactive processes involved in creating meaning and shaping perceptions of online partnering. Specifically, I used this theory to guide my interpretation and analysis of the

data. I searched for symbolic markers in the meanings that people ascribed to the interactions that shaped their perceptions of meeting their partner online. This theory served as a useful framework for interpreting and explaining the language, symbols, interactions, and meaning within and underlying the stories of participants. In this framework, interaction and meaning are viewed as iterative, reciprocal processes (Blumer, 1969), and research questions focused on illuminating the iterative and reciprocal processes of discussing and negotiating the stories participants tell about meeting their partners online.

Clinical Framework

Narrative therapy. Narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) is an expression of postmodern theory and a leading approach to family therapy. Since White and Epston first developed the model, it has been applied to a variety of clinical treatments and has become one of the most influential models of discursive, postmodern therapies (see Combs & Freedman, 2016; Matos, Santos, Gonçalves, & Martins, 2009; May, 2005; Schwartz, 1999; Smith & Nylund, 1997; White, 2004, 2007; Winslade & Monk, 1999; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996).

Developed as a reaction against a cybernetic approach to therapy, that was perceived as too dehumanizing to clients, narrative therapy does not look at patterns in human behavior, but rather explores how people map the world and construct meaning (White & Epston, 1990). In this approach, experiences are ambiguous, and meaning is not fixed; meaning can be interpreted in multiple ways. A narrative therapist, for example, would consider the multiple ways that experiences can be *language'd* to represent different meanings. A narrative therapist would consider the difference in meaning between calling the stigma associated with meeting partners online as “shame” and “wanting approval”. The first description makes stigma the problem, something to overcome. Based on theories of shame that describe it as a social emotion (Scheff,

2003), the second can be understood as suggesting a natural response to sharing vulnerable information about oneself and wanting approval and love. Since shame has psychological, social, and cultural components (Scheff, 2003), a narrative therapist would do well to first explore the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors associated with client perceptions of shame, ask questions about the relational components and interpersonal contexts, and question cultural assumptions and expectations that contribute to shame or fear of being perceived as stigmatized for having met a partner online.

Narrative therapy was also significantly influenced by Michel Foucault's (1965; 1974; 1977; 1987) philosophies of social discourse, namely that social discourses are composed by the dominant group and become internalized truths for citizens. Foucault's theories informed narrative therapy practices like questioning and challenging dominant assumptions, and bringing a discussion of ethics, power, and meaning to the forefront of therapy. A narrative therapist would view the social discourse of online stigma as a source of clients' feelings of self-stigma and internalized shame, and would work to deconstruct that discourse, highlighting the constructivist nature. Narrative therapists would also question assumptions about dominant social discourses on race, gender, sexuality, age, and other social categories. They would ask clients to consider how society's views gender, age, race, ethnicity, and age all contribute to their perceptions of stigma or shame in their relationships and their stories of meeting their partner.

Change in narrative therapy happens by doing two primary things: *externalizing* and highlighting *unique outcomes*. When you externalize, you help clients to see that they do not *have* a problem, nor *are* the problem; rather, they are struggling *against* a problem. When you highlight unique outcomes, you point out times when the client resisted or overcame the problem. Questions are the primary intervention used by narrative therapists to externalize and

highlight unique outcomes. They ask *relative influence questions* that explore how much the problem has affected the client and their family and how the family (or couple) has controlled the problem. They ask *deconstructing questions* that externalizes the problem and *open space questions* that explore unique outcomes. They use *preference questions* to understand how unique outcomes match their preferred experiences and *story development questions* to create new stories and strengthen alternative narratives. Narrative therapists ask *meaning questions* that challenge negative self-images and emphasize positive agency. Finally, they ask *future questions* that extend clients' stories into the future.

Role of therapist. Narrative therapists are seen as collaborators, clinicians who *situate* themselves with their clients (White, 2007). They assume that clients are the experts of their own lives and stories and therapists are the experts in the collaborative therapeutic process. Narrative therapists do not problem solve, they help clients separate themselves from their problem-saturated stories. They also assume that people generally have good intentions, but are influenced by the discourses around them. They offer clients more optimistic accounts of their experiences. Further, narrative therapists are seen as political agents who help free clients from oppressive cultural assumptions. They assist clients in developing alternative narratives about their lives that give them more agency and empower them to reach their goals (White, 2004).

Current study. While not a tradition clinical study (no observations or case reports), the research questions that guided this study have implications for the practice and teaching of couple and family therapy. The themes that emerged in the data were analyzed in a narrative therapy framework to understand the implications for marriage and family therapists using this particular model, or any model of postmodern therapy that privileges language and the principles

of social constructionism. Synthesis and reflection on the themes in the data were used to expand on applications in narrative therapy when working with clients who met their partners online.

Many postmodern models of therapy, including narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) and collaborative language systems (Goolishain & Anderson, 1987) rely on social constructionist theories and concepts to deconstruct meaning inherent in language and reconstruct language that gives clients greater value and meaning. In narrative therapy, individuals, couples, and families are assumed to jointly construct problematic realities (White & Epston, 1990). Just as meaning is constructed through language and interaction in a symbolic interactionist framework, meaning in narrative therapy is constructed socially through relationships and reinforced through dominant cultural narratives. Building on the interpretivist framework of symbolic interactionism, narrative therapy also assumes that new meaning can be constructed through new experience. Thus, narrative therapists believe that, through therapy, people can create new meanings for their experiences and develop more empowering narratives about their lives (White & Epston, 1990).

Statement of the Problem

Stigma. Erving Goffman (1959; 1963), a sociologist who explored self-presentation, defined *stigma* as an attribute that can be deeply discrediting and make people feel tainted and discounted. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman (1963) explored the experiences of stigmatized people, defined as people excluded from full social acceptance. Amongst stigmatized people, he distinguished between the *discredited* and the *discreditable*. *Discredited* people are those whose differentness is apparent (through physical handicap or ethnicity) and must be managed in social situations. *Discreditable* people are those whose differentness is not immediately apparent (prostitutes, addicts, criminals) and must manage

decisions about revealing their differentness. While Goffman (1963) focuses on how *discredited* people manage the tension of self-stigma or shame, he also focuses on how *discreditable* people control information about their differentness. He proposed that problems for *discreditable* people centered on learning strategies of self-protection, “passing” for someone without their “failings” (p. 73), and learning strategies to deal with the rejection of others (Goffman, 1963).

Under Goffman’s framework, using online dating services may be considered a “failing” to some, in that it can imply a failure to have met, or having difficulty meeting, a partner through traditional, more socially acceptable forms of dating offline (Rosenbaum et al., 2013). While becoming more widely used and accepted among younger generations, negative perceptions of online dating have existed since the platform’s inception (Donn & Sherman, 2002). Still, with increasing usage and popularity, online daters were perceived as nerdy, desperate, and socially inept (Whitty & Carr, 2006; Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Still today yet, it considered a discreditable practice by some, particularly when it is used as a tool to find sex (Goldenberg, Vansia, & Stephenson, 2016).

Frost (2011) reviewed current and classic theory on social stigma and its consequences for the socially stigmatized. While the field of social psychology had historically focused on the *perpetration* of stigma, Frost’s (2011) review revealed that recent scholarship increasingly focused on how *experiences* of stigma produce excess social stress and other negative consequences. While excess stress is certainly found in people with visible stigmas on a much different level, Frost (2011) found that excess stress is also found in people with concealable stigmas (e.g., LGBT community, people with mental health disorders).

Recent definitions of stigma have also adopted more social constructivist frameworks and defined stigma at the societal level. Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) suggested that

stigmatization occurs when people possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute or characteristic that conveys a devalued social identity in certain social contexts. They define these attributes and characteristics as either visible or invisible, controllable or uncontrollable, and linked to either appearance, behavior, or group membership (Crocker et al., 1998). In this view, stigma only resides in a social context, and is specific to certain relationships and contexts (Crocker et al., 1998). Thus, even though meeting a partner online is controllable and linked to a certain behavior, not something inherent to an individual, meeting a partner online is still considered stigmatized by many participants in this study, largely in the context of certain social situations and within certain relationships.

People who choose to date online certainly have the freedom to act and their experiences cannot be compared to those who experience systemic oppression based on visible stigmas. Systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, classism, and ageism can affect all aspects of one's life and personhood, and people with visible stigmas must manage stigma on both a much more personal and more global scale. However, there is a gradient of experiences, and it stands to reason that any identity concealed because it is perceived to be stigmatized has the potential to produce a fear of being discovered or produce excess stress. As well, concealing any stigmatized identity can be seen as a protective mechanism. In the current study, participants who felt stigmatized for dating online concealed their identity as an online dater to protect themselves from the judgment and stigma from others.

Scholarship has not addressed what aspects of online relationships contribute to feeling stigmatized about meeting a partner online. Despite articles in the popular press that insist online dating is shedding its social stigma (Angelini, 2013; Baxter, 2013; Harmon, 2003 Wong, 2010), this has not been confirmed or reflected in the scholarly literature. Scholars have attempted to

explain the social stigma of online dating, including Anderson (2005), who found that people's negative perceptions of online dating stem from having a lack of familiarity with or affinity for the internet. However, this may not hold true 12 years later. Cali, Coleman, and Campbell (2013) also proposed that negative perceptions of online dating stem from beliefs that it is inherently dangerous, particularly for women with less experience meeting a partner online. Using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to measure the responses of 82 women (divided into age groups of 18-23 and 24-36), Cali et al. (2013) found that women thought self-protective behaviors would be more important when going on a date with someone they met online than going on a date with someone they met at school. There was also a stronger effect found with older women and women with no prior experience dating someone they met online (Cali et al., 2013). However, these two studies do not paint a complete picture nor explain perceptions of stigma.

It is clear that the social stigma historically associated with personal ads and online dating centered on perceptions that the platform is dangerous, immoral or not respectable (Phegley, 2011), or for people who have difficulty or failed to meet partners offline (Rosenbaum et al, 2013). However, given the increased usage and acceptance of the platform in younger generations, it remains unclear as to why these perceptions persist, or what other characteristics of online daters are unknown that lead to negative or stigmatized perceptions. It is important to understand how this stigma is constructed presently, when the aforementioned reasons have seemingly been diminished. Moreover, the psychological effects of stigma can be great, directly affecting people who feel stigmatized via "mechanisms of discrimination, expectancy confirmation, and automatic stereotype activation, and indirectly via threats to personal and social identity" (Major & O'Brien, 2005, p. 393).

An identity threat model of stigma suggests that situational cues, collective representations of one's stigma status, and personal beliefs and motives shape perceptions of stigma-relevant situations for wellbeing (Major & O'Brien, 2005). As well, Crocker (1999) argued that the effects of stigma on self-worth are "negotiated, created, and acted upon in the situation" (p.91). Thus, the effects of stigma are not stable or innate to people's personalities; they emerge in certain situations and are function of the meanings given to those situations (Crocker, 1999). Interactions, and the often subtle features of individual situations shape meaning, both in Crocker's (1999) view and in a symbolic interactionist (Blumer, 1969) framework. As well, collective representatives, or dominant narratives or discourse that people bring to these situations shapes meaning in both Crocker's (1999) view and in a narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) framework. Thus, it would do scholars and clinicians well to investigate constructs of stigma, specifically, exploring how the situation one is in, and the social discourses or dominant narratives of meeting a partner online, shape people's meanings and experiences of stigma.

Shame. When people feel stigmatized, they internalize *self-stigma*, or the prejudice that people tend to turn against themselves (Crocker, 1999). Self-stigma can also be defined as shame. While the concept of shame is historically rooted in religious traditions, mythology, literature, and philosophy, in the 20th century, the concept of shame was first described in the psychoanalytic tradition (Weiss, 2015). Freud discussed shame as a fear of being exposed, as deeply painful, and a source of clinical resistance (Weiss, 2015). The concept of shame was later described in Erik Erikson's (1963) psychosocial stages of development as the resulting feelings of children's doubt of their own abilities.

In the 21st century, the concept of shame was increasingly defined as a *social* emotion (Scheff, 2003). Scheff's (2003) review of shame studies suggests that shame and social life are inextricably linked, that shame can be seen as a signal of a threat to social relationships, and that shame arises when individuals feel they have "failed" to live up to their standards and the standards of significant people in their lives (p. 254). Thus, understanding shame is needed to understand social systems, which include systems of courtship like online dating.

Balcom, Lee, and Tager (1995) also explored shame from a systemic clinical perspective, as they observed in couples, and discussed therapeutic stances and treatment techniques for working with shame in couples therapy. Ultimately, they found that shame could play a concealed role in blame, repetitive arguments, or therapy dropout (Balcom et al., 1995). It follows, then, that shame associated with meeting a partner online could play a role not only in individual health and wellbeing, but also in relational health and clinical success.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to understand how people perceive meeting their partner online as stigmatized. The secondary purpose was to understand how people's perceptions of stigma then influence the way they share their story of meeting online. The tertiary purpose of the study was to understand how marriage and family therapists, utilizing a narrative therapy framework, can work with clients to reduce feelings of stigma and shame associated with meeting a partner online, as well as create guidelines and suggestions for therapists working with clients who met their partners online generally. In attempting to understand these questions, I explored the ways individual characteristics, environmental factors, online platforms, and family were all perceived as influencing the way people tell their stories of

meeting a partner online. As a marriage and family therapist, I was particularly interested in understanding how family influences perceptions of stigma.

Clinically speaking, the aim of this study was to analyze themes using a clinical lens and develop suggestions for therapists, particularly those that work within social constructionist models of therapy like collaborative language systems (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Goolishian & Anderson, 1987) and narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990). Suggestions for therapists included not only deconstructing concepts that clients are influenced by, which postmodern therapists do regardless, but also enhancing assessment tools, developing interventions, and managing countertransference and self-of-therapist issues.

Research Questions

Marriage and family therapy (MFT) researchers Buehlman, Gottman, and Katz (1992) explored couples' views of how they met and found that couples who tell the *story* of how they met in a negative light were less likely to stay together. The research questions guiding the current study focused on the *story of how partners meet online*. Specifically, research questions attempted to unearth themes in the way perceptions of stigma influence the way participants tell their stories. The research questions were structured to discover the role individual characteristics, the environment, specific online platforms, and family all play in influencing perceptions of stigma and the way people tell their story. Further, questions assessed participants' perceptions of how meeting online influenced their relationship satisfaction.

Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986; 1990) explained that humans attach meaning to experiences, primarily, by telling stories about them. Stories are not only accounts of experiences, they are acts of meaning (Bruner, 1990). I was interested in the stories that individual share of meeting their partner online as reflective mechanisms of the meaning they

ascribe to online meetings, specifically exploring the degree to which that meaning was stigmatized.

Storytelling reflects *aspects* of stories that we value, and gives us insight into the way individuals and couples make meaning of their relationships and experiences. I was particularly interested in the stigmatized aspects (if they assigned stigma to their meanings) of stories that people either shared or concealed. Bruner (1986) argued that good stories are made in a *dual landscape*, one of action and one of consciousness. The landscape of action includes the setting, the actors, and the actions; the landscape of consciousness refers to how actors feel, know, and think (Bruner, 1986). Both of these dimensions are important in understanding the stories people tell. In this study, in attempting to understand the stories people tell about meeting a partner online, it was important to consider both the setting (online platform), the actors (partner and audience of story), and the actions (mode of telling).

Since researchers are largely unable to observe relationship initiations, they generally rely on self-report, through standardized questions (Custer, Holmberg, Blair, & Orbuch, 2008). Custer et al. (2008) argued that collecting open-ended narratives of relationship initiations should be used to complement standardized measures, stressing the importance of capturing *how* people talk about relationship initiations. Research questions in the current study explored the underlying beliefs, values, desires, and aspirations of participants through their stories and their self-reports. Primarily, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How is stigma *perceived* to influence the way individuals tell the story of meeting their partner online?
2. How do individuals discuss and/or negotiate the story of meeting their partner online?

3. How are individual characteristics and environmental factors *perceived* to influence the way individuals tell the story of meeting their partner online?
4. How are online platforms *perceived* to influence the way individuals tell the story of meeting their partner online?
5. How is meeting a partner online *perceived* to influence relationship satisfaction?

Definition of Terms

Digital natives and digital immigrants. Online dating sites and mobile apps are said to be evolving at a pace that may feel particularly overwhelming for “digital immigrants” (Wang, Myers & Sundaram, 2013, p. 409). *Digital immigrants* are generally defined as people who learned to use computers during their adult life. *Digital natives*, conversely, are generally identified as the generation of people born into the digital age (Wang et al, 2013), largely considered to be those born after 1979 or 1983. The term “digital native” was coined by Prensky (2001) in *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*, referring to a generation of students who were “native speakers” of the digital languages of various technologies.

However, Helsper and Eynon (2009) argued that the breadth of use, experience, self-efficacy and education were equally, if not more, important than age in explaining how people become digital natives (Helsper & Eynon, 2009). Wang et al. (2013) also suggest that while digital natives are assumed to be inherently technology-savvy, and digital immigrants assumed to have some difficulty with technology, a continuum exists between the two groups that can be conceptualized as “digital fluency” (p.409). Digital fluency is described as the “ability to reformulate knowledge and produce information to express oneself creatively and appropriately in a digital environment” (Wang et al., 2013, p.409). Factors that have a direct and indirect impact on digital fluency include demographic characteristics, educational factors, psychological

factors, social influences, opportunities to access technology, behavioral intention to use and frequency of use, and type of technology (Wang et al., 2013).

Online communication. Increasingly, users are communicating through mobile technology devices. These types of technologies provide increased functionality and opportunities to connect (i.e. more synchronous and location-based connections). In the context of this study, *online communication* refers to any communication sent electronically, through a digital technology device (computer, tablet, smartphone, cellular phone, or gaming console), usually in the forms of direct messages (“DM”), instant messages (which are synchronous or “live”), tags, or text messages (which are asynchronous and not “live”).

Online space. In the context of this study, I use *online space* or *digital space* to refer to any space that can be accessed electronically, and generally includes websites, mobile applications, and video games. I refer to relationships that are initiated or formed outside of any digital space as *offline* or *in-person*, however I recognize that relationships mediated through technology rely on offline or in-person meetings to initiate and solidify relationships. Terms like “real life” relationships, referring to relationships that began offline, may diminish the sense of legitimacy of relationships that people feel occur in their real lives, through technology. Thus, I avoid using such terminology.

Online dating. In common usage, any relationship mediated by the Internet is considered online dating (Best & Delmege, 2011). In the current study, I often use *online dating* or *online dating systems* as general to describe the myriad platforms that individuals meet online. Specifically, this includes online platforms wherein users meet partners in traditional, intentional ways (on traditional online dating websites and apps, and classified sites like Craigslist). This also includes online platforms where users meet in less traditional, unintentionally ways (through

social media, gaming or other multi-user online platforms, or on sites that are not intended for social networking, like Reddit).

Geo-based technology. Since online social networks are increasingly using mobile platforms, location-based features have become an important part of social networking (Chen, Kaafar & Boreli, 2013). Mobile applications largely includes location-based social discovery (LBSD) applications, which facilitate communication between mutually interested users within a certain distance of each other, allowing matched users to chat (Chen et al., 2013). *Geo-based*, or location-based, social discovery apps, such as Tinder and Grindr, allow users to discover others through real-time positioning, access localized pseudo-anonymous text and photo feeds, and message users synchronously within a proximate location (Ruiz Vicente, Freni, Bettini, & Jensen, 2011; Chen et al., 2013; “Features”, 2015). This study will explore how these spaces, wherein users have more agency over their visibility and proximity, might influence how they feel stigmatized or tell the story of how they met their partner.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Romantic Relationship Formation

Romantic relationships play a crucial role in shaping the character of adult lives (Bersheid & Peplau, 1983). While benefits vary based on individual characteristics, involvement in romantic relationships, in almost any configuration, is beneficial to individuals' physical health and psychological well-being (Sassler, 2010). Romantic relationships and mate selection have long been topics of scholarly interest. In contemporary society, many theories have been used to attempt to explain how and why people form romantic relationships. Researchers have used myriad frameworks to explore romantic relationship formation or mate selection, including assortative mating theory (Klohner & Mendelsohn, 1998), need complementarity theory (Mathes & Moore, 1985), adult attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), social exchange theory (Homans, 1958), and resource and evolutionary psychology theories (Foa & Foa, 1974), namely sexual strategies theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), among others.

After the sexual revolution and women's liberation movement of the 1960s, research in 1970s saw interesting trends in mate selection. According to Murstein's (1980) decade review of the literature, mate selection research in the 1970s focused on assortative and sociocultural determinants, a greater concern with courtship process, the idea of "love", and new theories of marital choice. Murstein (1980) concluded that "individual determination" (p. 777) in marriage increased, as did delayed marriage and the right not to marry at all. Additionally, Foa and Foa (1974) defined classes of interpersonal resources, both concrete and symbolic, used to describe people's perception of social behavior and formation of romantic relationships: love, status, information, money, goods and services. They argued that reciprocity in social exchanges must occur, and that the giving of resources is related to acceptance of self (Foa & Foa, 1974).

Overall, Murstein (1980) concluded that the interactive processes of mate selection (as described through exchange and balance theories), and not demographics, were given more critical attention in the literature in the 1970s.

In the 1980s, less critical attention was paid to marital choice and more focus was given to the formation and development of partner relationships (Surra, 1990). As well, legal marriage became less of a marker of permanence or relationship progress, and researchers focused more on the continuities in aspects of partner relationships and long-term predictors of relationship quality and satisfaction (Surra, 1990). Further, sex, which was once studied largely independent of relationships (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey & Institute for Sex Research, 1953; Masters & Johnson, 1966, 1979), was increasingly studied in the context of partner relationships (Surra, 1990).

In 1990, the U.S. Census first identified individuals in cohabiting relationships. Research in the 1990s distinguished between married and cohabiting couples and found that cohabiting couples were less homogenous than married couples on educational and racial demographics (Blackwell & Lichter, 2000). In the 2000s, research on partnering behavior examined the traits preferred in partners, the behaviors engaged in during early stages of dating, and factors influencing relationship satisfaction, sexual intimacy, cohabitation and marriage (Sassler, 2010). Scholarship on mate selection in the 2000s began to include more casual romantic and sexual relationships (“hook ups”), as well as online dating, marriage after children, cohabitation, and serial monogamy (Sassler, 2010).

All together, the last 50 years of research on mate selection has given us vast demographic information and insight into the processes of relationship formation and development. However, there is still significant divide among researchers regarding theoretical

approaches, methodologies, and life course perspectives (Sassler, 2010). Further, partnering behaviors change over the life course (both for structural and behavioral reasons) and research suggests that the behaviors and goals of young adults are widely divergent from older single adults (Sassler, 2010).

Online Relationship Formation

Communicating through technology. Ever since the first personal computers were introduced to the American public, in the late 1970's, the various ways that Americans use computers to communicate has been a critical topic for researchers (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Turoff, 1982). Most research on electronic communication initially focused on its industrial and organizational efficiency (Turoff, 1982), the speed of communication, regulation of feedback (both verbal and non-verbal), social anonymity, status and power, and norms and convention (Kiesler et al., 1984), leaving out any exploration of the *experiences* of people who used these types of communication technologies.

The behavioral and psychosocial effects of using technology to communicate, as well as the cultural significance, has been a critical research topic as well. Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, and McGuire (1983) used an empirical approach for investigating psychosocial issues raised by electronic organizational communication. First, they focused on the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on group interaction and decisions. Utilizing a controlled experimental design, they compared groups who were asked to reach consensus on a problem in three different contexts: once face-to-face, once using the computer anonymously, and once using the computer non-anonymously (Siegel et al., 1983). Data showed that computer-mediated communication had marked effects on communication efficiency, participation, interpersonal behavior, and decision making (Siegel et al., 1983). Generally, people in computer-mediated

groups were more uninhibited than they were in face-to-face groups as measured by uninhibited verbal behavior (Siegel et al., 1983).

In the decades following, research shifted away from solely organizational components of CMC, and expanded to both public and private electronic communication. Walther (1996) discussed divergent perspectives of the interpersonal character of electronic communication and proposed that CMC, while once presumed to be impersonal (due to lack of non-verbal cues), had the potential to become *hyperpersonal* when CMC facilitates communication that moves beyond normal interpersonal levels. Lea and Spears (1992) proposed that in the absence of face-to-face cues and prior knowledge about the person being communicated with electronically, subtle contextual or personality cues take on a greater value to the receiver. As scholars continued to investigate issues raised by technological change, psychosocial aspects of electronic communication, including inhibition and spontaneity, continued to be integral components of research on perceptions of online behavior and relationship formation (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). However, there was scant research on the *experiences* of people who utilized these technologies.

Online dating. From 2013 to 2015, the percentage of adults ages 18 to 24 searching for partners online (through dating sites or apps) almost tripled, from 10% to 27% (Pew Research Center, 2015). Among adults ages 55 to 64, the percentage has also doubled from 6% to 12% between 2013 and 2015 (Pew Research Center, 2015). While estimates vary, a recent nationally representative U.S. study ($N = 19,131$) also showed that between 2005 and 2012, more than one-third of marriages also began online (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, & VanderWeele, 2012). Cacioppo et al (2012) used survey data from an online survey conducted by Harris Interactive, a market research subsidiary of Nielson. E-mail invitations to participate in an on-

line survey were sent to 471,710 panelists in their database. Of those that responded, 19,131 respondents were eligible and reported being married once between 2005 and 2012. Cacioppo et al. (2012) also found that Americans are not only meeting their spouses online with increasing percentages, married couples who met online were slightly less likely to separate or divorce when compared with those that began through traditional offline venues. Using Pearson's chi-squared test, Cacioppo et al. (2012) investigated the extent to which marriages ending in separation or divorce differed for people who met online vs. offline. They found that the percentage of marital break-ups was lower for those who met their spouse online (5.96%) than offline [7.67%; $\chi^2(1) = 9.95, P < 0.002$] (Cacioppo et al, 2012). Further, while slightly reduced, these difference remained significant [$\chi^2(1) = 3.87, P < 0.05$] after controlling for covariates such as year of marriage, sex, age, educational background, ethnicity, household income, religious affiliation, and employment status (Cacioppo et al., 2012). Using both a Likert scale measuring relationship satisfaction and the Couples Satisfaction index (CSI), Cacioppo et al. (2012) conducted analyses that indicated marriages that began online were associated with slightly higher marital satisfaction than those that began offline (Cacioppo et al., 2012). Currently married respondents who met their spouse online reported higher marital satisfaction ($M = 5.64, SE = 0.02, n = 5,349$) than those who met their spouse offline [$M = 5.48, SE = 0.01, n = 12,253$; mean difference = 0.18, $t(17,601) = 46.67, P < 0.001$] (Cacioppo et al., 2012).

Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) also found that relationship quality amongst partners who met online was slightly higher. Using data from the How Couples Meet and Stay Together (HCMST) survey, a nationally representative longitudinal survey of 4,002 American adults replicating relevant questions from the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey, Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) found a modest correlation between self-reported relationship quality and

how couples met. They found that couples who met online reporting a slightly higher relationship satisfaction (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Analyses also indicated that the one-year breakup rate for couples who met online was slightly below average for the sample (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). HCMST included open and closed-ended questions about how respondents met their current partner (online meetings included meeting through dating websites, online classifieds, online chat rooms, online games, and through social media) and their relationship satisfaction.

According to a survey by Pew Research Center (2015), 15% of American adults report having used online dating sites and/or mobile dating apps, up from 11% in early 2013. This means that more than 20 million Americans have used online dating sites or apps. This increase was significant for two groups, the youngest adults and adults in their late 50s and early 60s (Pew Research Center, 2015). Further, in 2005 only 43% of online daters had actually progressed to the dating stage, and in 2015, 66% of online daters reported having gone on a date with someone they met through a dating site or dating app (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, it is unclear whether this increased usage is due to an increased interest in online dating sites and apps, or simply increased usage in smartphones and apps in general.

Online romantic relationships have been described as involving intense emotions, requiring caution; they are both enhanced and constrained by their textual nature, may occur in conjunction with offline romances, and are often not supported by offline social networks (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet, and Cole (2015) suggested that online daters who wait too long to meet potential partners in person might find it more difficult to accept their partner. Results of a national sample of online daters (N=433) found that online daters create mental constructs of their potential partners by using information provided on

dating profiles and filling in idealized details of who that person really is (Ramirez et al., 2015). Ramirez et al. (2015) also found that waiting too long to meet a partner in person is particularly difficult for those who have developed very inaccurate expectations due to dishonesty, misrepresentation, or exaggeration on their partner's profile. Relationship research also indicates that men tend to misrepresent personal assets, relationship goals, personal interests, and personal attributes most, whereas women are more likely to misrepresent weight (Hall, Park, Song & Cody, 2010).

A recent meta-analysis of 86 studies from the fields of psychology, sociology, and computer, behavioral and neurocognitive sciences was conducted by Khalid and Chaudhry (2015) to determine which activities and behaviors have an effect on the likelihood of turning technology-mediated communication into an offline first date. They revealed that initial interest in online partners was best captured through a desirable screen name, an attractive still picture, and a fluent headline message (Khalid & Chaudhry, 2015). Results further showed that descriptions of personal traits in online dating profiles increased likeability if there was a 70:30 ratio of information about self to information about what they desire, if their profiles stayed close to reality, and they used simple language with humor (Khalid & Chaudhry). Moreover, Khalid and Chaudhry's (2015) analysis revealed that online invitations were more likely to receive a response when they were short, personalized messages that addressed a trait in the respondent's profile, rhymed with their screen name or header message, and extended genuine compliments. Whitty (2010) found that while playful screen names are preferred by both men and women, men tend to be more attracted to names that indicate attractiveness ("cutie"), whereas women are more attracted to names that indicate intelligence ("cultured") (p.7). This is also consistent with

social exchange theories that view mate selection as an exchange of status and power for youth and beauty.

Digital spaces favor relationship formation for socially adept individuals, and an ineptitude with social cues may have detrimental effects on relationship formation (Walther & Parks, 2002). Khalid and Chaudhry (2015) found that online communication was most effective in leading to in-person meetings if there was: a genuine interest, a rapid turnaround, reciprocity in self-disclosure, mimicry of body movements when video-chatting, avoidance of criticism, humor, uncertainty about whether there was likeability, and an early move from electronic chat to a date. Khalid and Chaudhry (2015) did not directly address how meeting online contributed to a lasting partnership, nor did their research address the individual experiences of online daters.

Korchmaros, Ybarra, and Mitchell (2015) found that searching for partners online may be particularly efficient for individuals who have previously faced narrow dating markets (namely, individuals with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ community, and older single adults).

Korchmaros et al. (2015) used data from the national Teen Health and Technology Study (THTS) of adolescents 13 to 18 years old ($N = 5,091$) and showed that LGBTQ adolescents are more likely to initiate online romantic relationships than non-LGBTQ adolescents. Online environments have shown to be spaces wherein vulnerable populations can initiate relationships anonymously and safely (McKenna, 2007).

Comparisons between online and offline relationships are often made, and have often focused on various aspects of relationships that are *lost* through technology (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). However, more recent scholarship has also focused on aspects of relationships that can be enriched by meeting online, namely relationship satisfaction (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Scholarship broadly focused on online relationships has presented

contradictory views of their nature, describing them as either (a) highly impersonal and shallow; (b) interpersonal, but more restrictive than offline relationships; or (c) accelerated and highly intense (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). This is consistent with advances in most communication technologies; online dating allow for greater flexibility and greater amounts of interaction, yet they also create infinite possible for interaction and dilute the quality of those interactions.

Attributes. Research demonstrates that both men and women display strong preferences for similar attributes in online dating, in particular, strong same-race preferences (Hitsch, Hortacsu & Ariely, 2010). Non-White groups increasingly report interracial marriages, most White Americans marry someone of the same race. Pew Research Center (2008) found that one in seven new marriages in 2008 was interracial, which is up from less than .5 percent in 1970, three years after the landmark Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia*, which invalidated laws prohibiting interracial marriage (U.S. Census, 1999).

Curington, Lin, and Lundquist (2015) investigated preferences for multiracial online daters. They used a dataset consisting of approximately 200 million messages exchanged among 9 million registered users of a popular dating website, from November 2003 to October 2010 (Curington et al, 2015). Amongst multiracial populations, Asian-White daters in particular were given strong preferences through a heightened status, while Black-White daters were treated as an in-between group (Curington et al., 2015).

Trends and preferences shift with age, however. Based on the analysis of 600 online ads, Alterovitz and Mendelsohn (2009) found that with age, men desire women increasingly younger than themselves, whereas women desire older men until ages 75 and over, when they begin to seek men younger than themselves (likely because the pool of older men has decreased due to

death). Skopek, Schmitz, and Blossfeld (2011) also show that age preferences in online dating shift with age, with men increasingly preferring younger women as they age. However, they found these preferences were confounded by gender-specific preferences for attractiveness and education (Skopek et al., 2011). Menkin, Robles, Wiley, and Gonzaga (2015) analyzed a sample from a national dating website (N=5,434) and showed that in general, both men and women valued interpersonal communication more than sex appeal, however older adult users increasingly rated sexual attraction as less important, and women placed greater emphasis on communication than attractiveness. However, the dataset Menkin et al. (2015) utilized was derived from a questionnaire filled out by new users of eHarmony, a site known for matching more serious relationships (as opposed to Tinder, for example). Therefore, users (particularly men) who use this site may place more emphasis on interpersonal communication than attractiveness than on say another site more geared toward casual encounters (like Tinder).

McWilliams and Barrett (2012) found that both men and women filter for youthful characteristics online, and attempt to convey youthful images of themselves, however men focus more on physical attractiveness and women focus more on abilities. Men are also more likely than women to articulate wanting to exchange photos (Peters et al., 2013). When constructing their own self-presentation through profiles, women tend to focus on their looks and sociability and seek companionship without demanding caring roles; men tend to focus on their financial and occupational successes and seek committed relationships (McWilliams & Barrett, 2012).

Peters, Thomas, and Morris (2013) conducted a content analysis of 1,200 Craigslist posts made in the Personals section, and found that much of the ads' content was based on traditional gender stereotypes, such as men wanting sex and women seeking long-term relationships with men who have resources. Ong and Wang (2015) found that women's income was not a significant variable

in profile views of men, however women were more attracted to the profiles of men with higher incomes, and the more income the woman had the more she valued a higher income in her male partner.

Sritharan, Heilpern, Wilbur, and Gawronski (2010) examined factors that influence spontaneous and deliberate evaluations of potential online dating partners and found facial attractiveness to be the primary determinant of spontaneous evaluations of online daters. Self-reported or self-described ambition was found to influence deliberate evaluations only (Sritharan et al., 2010). Kreager, Cavanagh, Yen, and Yu (2014) found that both men and women tend to contact the most socially desirable “alters” regardless of their own desirability level. They found that men who initiate contact connect with more desirable partners than men who wait to be contacted, and female-initiated contacts (while sent four times less often than men) are more than twice as likely to result in a connection (Kreager et al., 2014). Unlike the other more traditional gendered characteristics of online daters, this seems to be breaking down gendered stereotypes of relationship initiation.

Online spaces. The overwhelming majority of adults who are online use some type of social networking site, or social media, identified as any website or mobile application that allows users to connect with others and share content (Cravens, Leckie, & Whiting, 2013). Facebook, in particular, has 1.86 billion daily active users globally (Facebook, 2016). While online social networks allow users to fulfill a variety of positive functions (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014), research has often focused on the potential for online social networks to distance partners and facilitate extradyadic affairs (Cravens et al., 2013; Kerkhof, Finkenauer, & Muusses, 2011; Toma, 2013).

Online social networks fulfill a myriad of personal and social functions. They allow users to construct online identities and express themselves in new ways, form and maintain relationships, observe and share in other people's online lives, and fulfill a sense of belonging (Vogel et al., 2014). Social media use has also been shown to be an important psychological, emotional, and relational measure and a predictor of self-esteem (Gonzales, Hancock, & Mirror, 2011), relationship satisfaction (Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012; Hesper & Whitty, 2010; Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011), and offline relationship closeness (Ledbetter, Mazer, & DeGroot, 2011).

Research suggests that more intimate communication online takes place in private conversations (i.e. in a direct message, not a public comment thread), indicating that there is a link between disclosure intimacy and feeling connected (Utz, 2015). The medium also influences the messages when making preliminary decisions about relationship development prospects (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Online communication has also been shown to influence the speeds at which self-disclosures are made and deep connections are felt (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Cali et al. (2013) argued that future research should focus on discovering how intentional meetings (on traditional dating websites or apps) are perceived differently than more spontaneous meetings (on more general social networking sites). Thus, the current study asked participants to describe how the specific platform they met their partner online was perceived to influence their experience and perception of stigma.

Filtering strategies. Despite increased usage and development, online dating is also still fraught with inefficiency. A seemingly endless pool of potential partners online tend to make users lazy and make uninformed decisions when presented with too many options (Wiederhold, 2015). Perceptions of endless options have also been shown to delay offline communication,

resulting in misinterpretations or rejection of offline meetings (Finkel et al., 2012; Wiederhold, 2015). Specific features of various online platforms may also impede successful communication. For example, the ability to browse anonymously on dating websites and apps may actually hinder signals to potential mates in that users may be unaware that potential mates are viewing their profiles, and thus interested in them (Information Technology Newsweekly, 2016).

A rapidly increasing online dating market (fueled by an increase in the dating age population), intensifies a shopping culture of dating that may weary users, particularly in that it can both draw out the courting process and lead to impulsive assessments (Best & Delmege, 2011). While filter theories for mate selection have existed in some form in the last couple centuries (Regan, 2008), the consequences of an increasingly specialized filtering system in online dating increases “the tendency to shop for partners with perfect qualifications” (Heino et al., 2010, p. 437).

Best and Delmege (2011) used focus group data to explore themes surrounding filtering strategies. They argued that the vast number of potential partners found online increases the use of a filtering out strategy, as opposed to a catching strategy (Best & Delmege, 2011). Filtering often begins at the initial screening process, and online daters become increasingly proficient in filtering features as they continue to use the sites or apps (Best & Delmege, 2011). Users are also increasingly employing strategies for searching profile commentary and identifying inconsistent information or behavior (Best & Delmege, 2011). Certain platforms, like OKCupid, allow users to search for specific words within other users’ profiles (for example, a user with an interest in Seinfeld trivia could search OKCupid’s database for all users who included the term “Seinfeld trivia” in their profile description). Motivated users may search Google or other search engines to corroborate information about they find on other users’ profiles once they feel invested in a

potential partner or are intrigued enough to find out more information. While users employ many filtering strategies, online daters report relying on a “filtering instinct” before investing in an online relationship (Best & Delmege, 2011, p. 238).

Impression management. Goffman (1959) argues that impression management includes the methods, either consciously or unconsciously, people employ to control perceptions others form of them, and self-presentation is a person’s goal to influence those impressions. The struggle for online daters, as well, is wanting to present positive qualities of themselves, while also presenting their authentic self (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). Research exploring self-presentation strategies in online dating contexts has shown that online daters attend to social cues online, create profiles that reflected their ideal selves, and attempt to establish the accuracy of their claims (Ellison et al., 2006). Close and Zinkhan (2004) found that women were more likely to share old photos and not disclose their age and weight when interacting with prospective matches online.

With greater emphasis on nonverbal communication cues and asynchronous communication, online spaces were first thought to allow for greater control and malleability over impression management than face-to-face self-presentation (Walther, 1996). Current research indicates that approximately 20% of online daters have asked someone to help them create or review their profile, and that women are especially likely (30% of women as compared to 16% of men) to enlist a friend to help them manage their online presentation (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Impressions are also managed online through the tone with which we present ourselves, which can hinder the presentation of our most authentic selves. Certain grammatical components are associated with certain tones like criticism and sarcasm (Thompson & Filik, 2016). Current

research indicates that “emoticons” also play a significant role in clarifying the tone and intention of online messages (Thompson & Filik, 2016). According to Thompson and Filik (2016), emoticons are:

Symbols produced by creatively repurposing and combining existing characters to represent something new: signifying something absent in written language, or something more effectively ‘said’ through symbol. They most frequently take the form of expressive faces, such as ☺ or ☹, but can also include other symbols, like <3 (heart). (p. 105)

While commonly used interchangeable, emoticons are to be distinguished from “emojis”, which are used more specifically to express emotions. Alongside emojis and emoticons, popular usage of online slang and abbreviations like “lol” (laugh out loud) and “jk” (joking) are increasingly used to express emotions or reactions. While the use of emoticons may be culturally specific (Dresner & Herring, 2010), certain emoticons indicate particular intents across cultures, like tongue and wink emoticons as indicators of sarcasm and ellipsis as an indicator of criticism (Thompson & Filik, 2016).

Risk and deception. Dating can be risky, both in person, and online. Using in-depth interviews of 29 individuals, Couch (2012) found that all participants believed that online dating was risky in some way. Perceived risks identified were lies and deceit, emotional, physical, and sexual risks (including sexual violence), and risks encountering dangerous and untrustworthy people (Couch, 2012). The risks of forming romantic relationship online also include being lured into “online dating romance scams”, which may include identity theft, being lured into unsafe environments, and/or being physically, mentally, or emotionally harmed (Whitty & Buchanan, 2016). Couch (2012) also found that when people talk about risks of online dating, they do so in terms of the ‘other’, moving ownership of risks away from themselves (Couch, 2012). Research

in the fields of psychology and sociology has long demonstrated that expectations and motivations increase the probability of engaging in trusting behavior (Deutsch, 1958), and that trust is highly correlated with personality predispositions and people's general view towards human nature (Deutsch, 1960). Establishing trust online is no different. Research shows that empathic accuracy has significant influence on online interpersonal trust (Feng, Lazar, & Preece, 2004).

Deceptive behavior, that violates trustworthiness, is common in online dating because information can be easily manipulated (Lo, Hsieh, & Chiu, 2013). Online daters tend to have lower perceptions of authenticity of online photos that are more physically attractive (Lo et al, 2013). Further, people employ higher levels of deception in the way they present themselves to people they find more attractive (Lo et al, 2013). Women also employ higher levels of deception in self-presentation than men in online dating environments (Lo et al., 2013). Peters et al. (2013) analyzed various aspects of both male and female Craigslist personal ads, including the tone of the ads, criteria for partners, types of interactions, and self-disclosure. They found that authenticity in the context of online dating is an issue for both men and women.

Initiation Narratives

Storytelling helps people understand their social worlds, cope with stress, and create a sense of order and coherence in their lives (Custer et al., 2008). Stories reflect subjective realities, and may differ from the stories others have of the same event. Thus, the story cannot be separated from the storyteller. People also continually reconstruct the stories they tell in order to achieve coherence, often varying those stories in different environments (Custer et al., 2008). Vangelisti (2004) saw family life as a process of interpretation through stories: "The 'stuff' of

family stories – what is being transmitted and interpreted – is beliefs, values, desires, and aspiration.” (p. 524).

People are often asked to tell the stories of how they met their spouses or partners, or how their relationships began (Custer et al., 2008). These stories provide valuable information. They contain three key aspects: (a) narrative style (how the story is told); (b) narrative content (what the stories are about); and (c) narrative consistency (over time, between people and social environments) (Custer et al., 2008). Relationship initiation narratives have been shown to be predictive of relational well-being (Custer et al., 2008). Storytelling can also provide insights into a couple’s wellbeing by reflecting aspects of the couple as either collaborative or conflictual storytellers (Holmberg & Orbuch, 2004). Higher relational well-being has been associated with relationship initiation stories that are (a) agreed upon by partners, (b) not particularly romantic, emotional, or dramatic and (c) reflect a “we” orientation (Custer et al., 2008, p. 461).

Wamboldt (1999) explored couple’s relationship narratives, including the stories of how they met, and found that couples’ ability to coordinate their stories was related to higher relationship satisfaction. Using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), Wamboldt (1999) measured premarital couples’ (N=63; majority White, Protestant) relationship satisfaction against their confirmation/disconfirmation of their partners narratives, and found that women who disconfirmed their partners story had lower relationship satisfaction.

Online initiation. While research provides insight into the characteristics of online dating, and the processes involved online dating, a gap in the literature exists. To date, no known studies have explored the way individuals tell the story of how they met their partner online, or online initiation narratives. As well, no research studies have addressed how couples discuss and negotiate their online courtship stories, However, Custer et al. (2008) argued that couples whose

relationships are not as “positively sanctioned” by society are more likely to adapt their courtship stories to their audience or environment (p. 461). Viewing online relationship initiation as something that is violating social norms, or is stigmatized to some degree, is then likely to affect the way that individuals tell the story of meeting a partner online. Custer et al (2008) argue that “all couples use narratives as a means of constructing new reality together, narratives may be an especially important tool for less traditional couples, who typically cannot rely on culturally established relationship norms and meanings” (p. 465). While the original meaning of “less traditional” couples was meant to include interracial, interethnic, same-sex, or age-discrepant couples, it could be argued that by violating societal norms, couples that met online still fit into some people’s definition of “less traditional”. While it is becoming more common, the majority of relationships are still initiated face-to-face.

The Online Relationship Initiation Scale (ORIS), developed by Harris and Aboujaoude (2016), was developed to examine the psychosocial implications of online relationships. Using classical and item response theory, an anonymous online survey of adults (N=713) aged 18–71 years, was used to test hypotheses about online relationship initiation. Results confirmed hypotheses that men were more likely than women to initiate online relationships, or attempt to initiate relationships online (Harris & Aboujaoude, 2016). Harris and Aboujaoude (2016) also found that online relationship initiation was positively correlated with financial distress and a willingness to engage in infidelity or unprotected sex. The ORIS was negatively correlated with age, indicating that younger participants were more likely to initiate online relationships. The scale was also negatively correlated with life satisfaction, and Harris and Aboujaoude (2016) argued that “those experiencing some distress in their personal life may go online to improve their interpersonal relationships” (p. 491).

Family influence. Since no known studies have explored how people tell the stories of meeting their partner online, no known studies exist exploring the role that family can play in how individuals tell their stories. In the current study, it was revealed that family's values and experiences shape the way family members share information and tell stories about meeting their partner online. While research on this particular topic does not exist, research has explored the role of family support and acceptance in psychological wellbeing of people with stigmatized identities. While the stigmatized identities of LGBT individuals is oppressive on systemic levels and cannot be compared evenly with the stigma of online dating, research on family support and family acceptance of stigmatized identities in LGBT adults showed they played a substantial role in psychological wellbeing and were related to the process of disclosure to family (Elizur, 2001).

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Qualitative Paradigm

Generally, qualitative paradigms of research focus on contextualization, presentation, and interpretation of participants' experiences in their natural settings (Glesne, 2006). This is underscored by the inherently constructivist goal of qualitative research to understand multiple realities. Rather than relying on quantitative principles like measurement and prediction, qualitative research provides rich descriptions of people's experiences (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The process of qualitative research involves emerging questions and procedures, data collected in natural settings, inductive data analysis, and the researcher's interpretations of the meaning of the data (Lincoln et al., 2011).

A qualitative approach to research focuses on individual meaning, and the importance of understanding the complexity of experience (Lincoln et al., 2011). Online relationships, for example, have been explored qualitatively through the meanings that users have constructed around their online interactions (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). Narratives and stories are also inherently qualitative in nature, deriving meaning from personal experience. Rothenberg (2000) also argued that rich descriptive information from online participants is vital to our understanding of the nature of online romances, thus this study explores individual experiences through an online survey. Participants were asked to provide as much detail as they needed to describe their perceptions and many participants wrote extensive, detailed descriptions of their perceptions. Further, the anonymity of the survey provided an opportunity for participants to share their perceptions in rich detail without fear of being identified. Further, online anonymity has been shown to shift individual and social boundaries and all for more frequent or spontaneous self-disclosures (Suler, 2004).

Recruitment

Both snowball sampling and purposeful sampling approaches were employed for recruitment (Howell, 2010). Purposeful sampling allowed for an informationally representative sample, not a statistically representative sample, and I was specifically recruiting participants who had experience meeting a partner online. Snowball sampling was also useful for this study because this technique is often used in hidden populations, which are difficult for researchers to access. Since there is no database of registered online daters, snowball sampling seemed appropriate.

I purposely sampled adults (individuals over the age of 18) who have met partners online within the last five years. I did not include minors for both theoretical reasons (they are likely not old enough to have had significant relationships) and for practical reasons (consent from a minor requires measures to ensure safety that I could not guarantee through an online survey). Namely, if minor participants experienced difficult emotions while describing the stories, I would not have been able to provide them with direct resources to manage their emotions.

Participants were recruited through social media posts and “shares”, through forums on datingadvice.com, Reddit, Craigslist and listservs through the Virginia Tech Graduate School’s listserv, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, and the National Council on Family Relations, all distribution lists I had access to because of my school affiliation and professional memberships. I also used word-of-mouth recruitment with personal and professional contacts who were identified as having networks of social contacts who had experience meeting partners online.

To ensure a diverse sample, I posted recruitment material in various sections on Craigslist, which has shown to be a recruitment tool particularly useful when targeting

participants often underrepresented in research (Alto, McCullough, & Levant, 2016). Using Craigslist as a recruitment tool also helped to decreased sampling errors, wherein the sample would otherwise deviate from the true nature of the U.S. population (Isaac & Michael, 1995). I posted recruitment material on Craigslist sections from urban and rural communities around the United States. I used a stratified random sample and initially, I randomly selected four large cities and four more rural counties, each from the different regions of the United States (northwest, southwest, northeast, and southeast). Through random sampling (randomly selected from a list of all cities that Craigslist hosts), I shared the information on the community pages of Craigslists in New York, NY, Winchester, NY, Miami, FL, Florence, Al, Indianapolis, IN, Scottsbluff, NE, Phoenix, AZ, and Roseburg, OR. Since I received such a high response rate, (I collected more than twice my target sample within a few days of sharing the recruitment material) and reached saturation so quickly, I closed the study. I coded data as it came in and once I observed that no new codes were being generated as new responses came in, I closed the survey (this happened at about 40 or 50 responses, but I left the survey open for one more day to increase the diversity in my sample).

Recruitment materials, which were approved by Institutional Review Board (IRB #17-148) before recruitment began, described the purpose of the study in simple terms and included a summary statement, eligibility requirements, and a link to the online survey (See Appendix A). All announcements contained contact information for the study and the IRB approval number. Participants were told they had the option of entering a gift card drawing as compensation and were be eligible to win a \$50 Amazon gift cards, with a one in 20 odds of winning.

Participants

Qualitative research generally follows the concept of saturation when determining sample size. Sample size is determined by the content, quality, and depth of the responses, so it is difficult to make general statements about acceptable sample sizes. Some qualitative researchers argue that 15 participants is the smallest acceptable sample size for a qualitative study (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). However, Charmaz (2006) argued that 25 participants is adequate for smaller qualitative projects, and others suggest that qualitative samples are generally at least 50 participants (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). Thus, given the online method of recruitment and the broad inclusion criteria for this study, it was my hope to have at least 50 rich descriptions. However, 110 participants responded to the survey within a few days of sharing recruitment material.

While saturation was reached after approximately 30-40 surveys, all participant responses were coded and included in the dataset and new codes. Even though no new substantial themes were arising in the data after 30-40 responses, I kept the survey open in the hopes that new respondents would yield *richer* data, that elaborated on the codes that were already emerging. When data yielded no new substantial information and a significant amount of rich descriptions were captured, saturation was assumed (Creswell, 2012), and the survey was closed. I noticed general themes in participants' experiences and perceptions, and I continued to collect data because while some respondents described enough of their perception to generate codes, some of their responses were not descriptive enough to understand the deeper meanings in their responses. For example, many respondents said they felt meeting online felt stigmatizing if they were sharing their stories with a certain audience, but I did not consider saturation reached until a respondent described that perception, and the deeper meaning in more detail that those audiences

were perceived to possess very specific attributes (i.e. one participant shared a story about her mother making derogatory comments about her meeting her partner on Craigslist, and through her story I understand the deeper meaning of her feeling like she had failed in some way in her mother's eyes). This was not captured through the various respondents who had described the same contact, but in much more shallow terms prior to that response.

Inclusion criteria for participants was as follows: (a) participants must be 18 years of age (b) participants must either currently be in a romantic relationship that was initiated online or have been in one within the past five years. Given the anonymity of the survey, and the relatively low chance (1 in 20) of winning a gift card, I have no reason to assume that participants would be motivated to be deceptive about themselves or distort the truth of their experiences or perceptions. Participants were told it would take approximately While the survey was anonymous, participants were asked if they were willing to disclose contact information (email address) to be contacted for follow up questions. Seventy eight out of 110 participants agreed to be contacted for follow-up questions. Participants were also asked to provide an email address if they wanted to be entered in the gift card drawing.

Demographics. Participants in the sample ranged in ages from 19 to 62, with a mean age of 32 and a mode and median of 29. The sample had 91 females and 19 males, all describing themselves as either cis gender or not qualifying their gender as either cis or trans. Regarding sexual orientation, 81 participants identified as straight or heterosexual, 19 as bisexual, 5 as gay, 3 as lesbian, and 1 as queer. Participants self-identified as either White or Caucasian (N-91), however 4 participants identified as Black or African American, 2 as Asian, 1 Greek, 4 Hispanic, 1 Middle Eastern, 2 participants described themselves as generally "mixed", 1 as Caucasian/Middle Eastern, 2 as White/Native American, and 2 as White/Hispanic.

When asked about religion, the majority of participants identified as Christian or were undefined in their religious identity. Specifically, participants identified with some form of Christianity (40), as Undefined or Other (19), Atheist (14), None (15), Agnostic (11), Jewish (4), Spiritual (3), Muslim (1), Druid (1), Asatru (1), Quaker (1). See Appendix E for a breakdown of religious and spiritual identities reported.

The researchers. I a female doctoral student (33) and instructor of marriage and family therapy. One of the graduate students with whom I have worked and taught, and who had taken courses in research methods, assisted in re-coding some of the data to ensure dependability. Both myself and the graduate student I worked with were born in the United States. I tried to directly address any age and power disparities and the potential for my unintended influence over the graduate student's opinions when discussing the data analysis process, the findings, and their potential meaning. The graduate student with whom I worked individually re-coded about one fifth of the data; the first 20 participants' responses, after my initial coding. I invited her to code her portion of the data without having seen my initial codes, so that it would be completely independent. I asked her to describe her codes and give her interpretations before I shared mine. We discussed differences among our codes and our interpretations, and when appropriate, came to a consensus about the fundamental meaning in the codes. For example, she identified "finances" as a code when one participant described the benefits of meeting online as not having to pay to go out to dinner to get to know someone, however I did not see that as a recurring meaning unit in any other responses, nor did I find it relevant to the research questions.

Data Sources and Collection

Data sources in the current study included an online open-ended survey, follow-up interviews with five participants, and memos written throughout the research process (see

Appendix E for a sample of memos). In December of 2016, I created a qualitative open-ended online survey to explore individuals' perceptions of stigma in meeting partners online. The survey was created in Qualtrics, an online research and survey tool, and characteristics of the survey developed as the study was conceptualized and drafted. I interviewed five participants who provided contact information for follow-up questions. I interviewed participants who provided nuanced descriptions of their experiences, and whose perceptions warranted a deeper inquiry. I asked participants to elaborate on the meanings they ascribed to their perceptions and to give more detailed descriptions of their experiences sharing their story.

Survey data from Qualtrics was directly imported into NVivo Version 11.0., a software program used by researchers to analyze very rich text-based information. NVivo was used to organize the codes and themes that I generated, and it is appropriate software where deep levels of analysis are required by the researcher. NVivo allows users to organize information with *nodes* or labels, which enable large-scale text queries to identify frequencies in key words or phrases. Queries then bring relevant quotes from all respondents into a single space to analyze.

Before beginning the online survey, participants were asked two pre-screening questions. The first question asks respondents to confirm that they are at least 18 years of age, and the second question asks them to confirm that they are currently in a relationship with someone they met online, or at least have been in the last five years. Respondents who failed to respond affirmatively to both questions were redirected to a page indicating they were ineligible for the study, and then thanked for their time. If they answered affirmatively to both questions, they were prompted to complete the survey (see Appendix A).

Before filling out the demographic portion of the survey, participants were presented with consent information and informed that completion of the survey implied consent. They were also

told that the survey would take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Based on examples of responses that I piloted with peers before the survey was sent out, I expected to find that participants would be able to provide rich data, about a few paragraphs for each question, in approximately fifteen minutes. Participants took an average of 34.56 minutes to complete the survey, however the median time was 18.48 minutes. This difference is likely explained by the measures of the survey data. Qualtrics measures the duration that a survey stays open, not necessarily how long it took to complete the survey. It is extremely likely that some participants opened the survey and came back to it over a period of time, as a few participants took hours to complete the survey, with the longest time reported as ten hours and thirty-one minutes.

While some responded with rich, detailed accounts of their experiences and perceptions, some provided less description and provided one or two sentences as a response for each questions. As well, some participants provided lengthy descriptions that were not rich with meaning that was relevant to this study's research questions. Others provided shorter descriptions that were laden with much more depth and meaning. A few participants' responses were particularly meaningful and insightful, and I followed up with certain participants based in part on nuanced elements of people's perceptions that influenced perceptions of stigma and their stories. Specifically, I followed up with 3 of the participants who spoke about how their race and ethnicity was perceived to impact their online dating narratives.

While some of the codes emerged with more prevalence, I did not consider saturation to be reached until a respondent provided a rich description of the particular codes I had identified. For example, *platform* emerged as a code early on since participants were asked to describe their perceptions of various platforms, however I did not consider this code to be saturated until responses came in that identified deeper meanings of platform typology. I also ensured that I got

rich descriptions of participants experiences by following up with 5 participants for follow-up interviews. Follow up interviews were chosen with participants who identified interesting aspects of their experiences as influencing their perceptions (i.e. religion, ethnicity, geography) but did not provide detailed descriptions of the meaning of these perceptions. Follow-up interviews allowed me to gather deeper meanings and to clarify the role that religion, ethnicity, and geography played in the way participants perceived stigma and shared their stories of meeting online with others. Follow-up interviews last between 10 and 20 minutes and supplemented the lack of depth in the open-ended survey format with follow-up interviews with five participants to understand a deeper level of meaning.

Respondents began the survey by filling out a demographic portion that asked for their age, sex/gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion/spirituality, highest degree earned, location, and relationship status. These were not forced-response questions and participants could choose to leave any portion blank. The demographic portion was then followed by the below questions, in an open-ended format, and with no restrictions on word count:

1. Please share the story of how you met your partner.
2. In general, do you feel that meeting a partner online is at all socially stigmatized?
 - a. If yes, how does social stigma about meeting someone online influence the way you feel about yourself, how you met your partner, and the way you tell the story of how you met?
 - b. If no, please describe why you believe meeting a partner online is not socially stigmatized
3. How do your own individual characteristics influence the way you tell the story meeting your partner online? (age, gender/sex, race/ethnicity, education, income level, location, religion)
4. How does your environment influence the way you tell the story of meeting your partner online? (where you are, occasion for gathering, number of people, etc.)
5. How does the specific platform where you met your partner influence the way you tell the story of meeting them? (Craigslist vs OKCupid, Tinder vs Bumble, Sims vs World of Warcraft, Instagram vs Snapchat, etc.)
6. How do your family's feelings about meeting someone online influence the way you feel about meeting your partner and the way you tell the story of meeting them?
7. Have you discussed and/or negotiated the "story of how we met" with your partner?

- a. If yes, please describe what that discussion was like.
 - b. If no, why do you think you have not discussed it?
8. Has meeting your partner online influenced your relationship satisfaction? Why or why not?
 9. If there is anything else you wish to share on this subject, please do so here

Participants were then advised to respond in as much or as little detail as they felt necessary in order to fully respond to each question; they were encouraged to be as detailed as they felt comfortable with. When responding to questions, they were asked to reflect on a relationship that began online, either one they were currently in, or one they had been in within the past five years. Participants were made aware that their responses were anonymous and confidential, and they would not be identified by name in the results of this study.

After respondents completed the survey, they were asked if they would like to provide their email address for one or all of the following reasons: (a) they would like to receive a copy of the study's results once completed; (b) they agree to be contacted for follow-up questions or member checks; (c) they would like to be entered in the drawing for one of three \$50 Amazon gift cards being offered as compensation. Email addresses were saved in files separate from files given to my student, and were protected with a password and coded when drawn for the gift card.

Data sources included 81 double-spaced pages of data from the only survey responses and 12 pages of notes and transcripts of five follow-up interviews. Follow-up interviews took approximately fifteen minutes each, one conducted in person and four telephonically. Follow-up interviews were conducted to member-check the codes and themes that emerged from the data and to ask follow-up question to develop a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions and meanings. Data sources also included various forms of memoing that I engaged in throughout the research processes. Memoing provides opportunities to expand and reflect on the relationship

between the codes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Memos were written during the development of research questions, the data collection process, and during the data analysis with the emergence of codes. This process was repeated until all the data were collected and all themes emerged.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), an approach to research used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) in qualitative data. Thematic analysis, once considered a tool to use across different qualitative methods of research, has become a method in its own right, and a foundational method for qualitative analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). This method allows for flexibility in the choice of theoretical framework, and unlike other methods of qualitative analysis such as discourse analysis (Philips & Hardy, 2002) and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003), thematic analysis is not bounded to one particular theoretical or epistemological framework.

Thematic analysis can be an essentialist, realist, or “contextualist” method of analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 9). While an essentialist approach simply reports the experiences and meanings of participants, a constructionist method examines the ways in which those experience and meanings are the results of social discourses (Braun & Clark, 2006). The current study adhered to a contextualist approach, which accounts for both essentialist and constructionist frameworks, and considers both the ways individuals make meaning of their experiences and the ways the broader social context influence those meanings. Thus, thematic analysis was used in this study to both reflect the reality of participants’ experiences with telling the stories of meeting their partners online, and to deconstruct those experiences in the context of social constructs such as stigma.

According to Braun and Clark (2006), a theme is “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 10). A theme is also not necessarily dependent on the frequency of codes; it should simply capture an important element to the research questions. As opposed to methods of qualitative research that focus on inductive analysis (such as grounded theory), patterns in thematic analysis can be identified inductively or deductively. An inductive approach to establishing themes is data-driven and themes may not have a strong relationship to the research questions, whereas a deductive approach is more analyst-driven and tends to provide less of a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Given that this study was driven by social constructionist theories (symbolic interactionism and narrative therapy), I used an inductive approach to analyze the data and read and re-read the data, coding diversely for any themes that emerge, as opposed to deductively searching the data for ways that stigma shows up.

Themes in the current study were searched both at an interpretative level and at an explicit level. I identified themes explicitly, or on the surface, and I identified the underlying ideas and assumptions that have been theorized as influencing the semantic content of the data. For example, I explored codes to identify assumptions that language and symbols shape meaning (symbolic interactionism) and ways dominant narratives of meeting online shape our perceptions of stigma (narrative therapy).

Thematic analysis was also an appropriate method for the current study in that it is particularly suited to analyze themes *across* participants’ experiences, as opposed to other types of narrative analysis that are intended to analyze data *within* participants’ experiences, such as in individual interviews or case studies (Clark & Braun, 2013; Roulston, 2001). Thematic analysis

has six clearly defined steps that are meant to ensure clarity and rigor in the research process, as well as produce meaningful patterns. Steps include: (a) familiarization with data; (b) generating initial codes; (c) searching codes for themes; (d) reviewing themes; (e) defining and naming themes; and (f) producing a final report (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Familiarization with the data. It is important to be immersed in the *data corpus*, the entire data, and become familiar with it by actively reading and re-reading before identifying initial codes (Braun & Clark, 2006). While I did not identify codes during the initial reading, I took memos on my initial ideas. The first review of the data was conducted individually to familiarize myself with the content of participants' responses and understand their individual experiences and unique meanings. The second review of the data was done simultaneously but independently with the graduate student I worked with (for her, the first 20 participants).

Generating initial codes. This stage involved the creation of initial *codes*, which identify features of the data that are interesting to the researcher and reflect the most basic elements of the data that can be analyzed in a meaningful way (Braun & Clark, 2006). While my analysis focused on individual meaning units, in that I was reading and re-reading individual excerpts, the context of each extract, including the overall tone and sentiment of all the participants' responses, as well as the descriptive data the participant provided were all kept in mind. For example, when coding for the following excerpt: "Me and my husband actually came up with a COMPLETELY different story as to how we met because we were embarrassed! Lol! I feel like people would look at our relationship differently if they knew that we met online." I initially assigned the codes *embarrassment*, *fabricating story*, and *judgement*. However, when re-reading this transcript in the context of this participant's demographic information (Christian, from small town in South Dakota, married), I re-interpreted this excerpt in a broader context and considered

the participants' culture from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Using this framework, it is assumed the participants' perception that meeting a partner online was something to be concealed was in some regard a reflection of the interactions this participant had with people in her environment.

During the first stage or cycle of coding, it was also important to code for as many potential codes and themes as possible (Braun & Clark, 2006). Participants' entire dataset was initially coded by identifying, highlighting, and labeling meaning units and labeling them with *nodes* in NVivo. I created 97 unique codes in the initial stage of coding. In the second stage of coding, I combined initial codes together if they reflected a more concise meaning unit. For example, in the first cycle, I coded *shattering stigma* for an excerpt from a participant who talked about comfortably sharing her story. In the second stage of coding, I noticed that this meaning had not shown up for any other participant, nor was the concept of shattering stigma a central component of this participant's responses. I decided that the meaning of this code was already embedded in another code, *embracing the story*, because the participant embraced their story in part because they wanted to shatter the stigma of meeting online. Ultimately, the initial 97 codes were reduced to 42 codes, either because I combined codes with similar meaning units into more concise meaning units, or codes had a small prevalence and little significant in the overall context of the research questions. For example, initially I coded *children* because one participant spoke about finding it difficult to tell her children about meeting her spouse online. However, no other participant spoke about sharing the story with children, nor was telling her children a central component of the way she felt about sharing. As well, as younger generations increasingly find partners online, I did not believe that difficult sharing stories with children

would be as relevant as sharing with parents. The majority of participants that spoke about difficulty sharing with family spoke about sharing with *older* family members.

Searching codes for themes. After all of the data was coded, data identified by the same codes was be compared and sequenced together in NVivo. Themes were initially determined by the number of instances the theme appears across the data, however more instances do not necessarily mean the theme itself is more crucial (Braun & Clark, 2006). For example, the code *desperation* only appeared in four participants' responses, however the depth and meaning of those descriptions warranted a code because participants described desperation as a fundamental tenet of feeling stigmatized by meeting their partner online. It was significant to a deeper understanding of self-stigma and shame in these participants. More important than prevalence of codes when determining themes, consistency in how themes are determined is important in thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). I consistently relied on the depth and significance of meaning in each of the codes as a determinant in identifying them.

Codes were sorted into themes and relevant data extracts within each theme were arranged. I used tables to help sort codes and categories, as well as visual representation of the data, such as thematic maps (see Appendices B and C). I wrote memos that detailed how I interpreted the relationships between codes, themes, and sub-themes. If they did not fit into a theme in a meaningful way, some initial codes were discarded or temporarily housed in a miscellaneous category at this stage. For example, *Bumble*, the feminist dating app, was a code generated in the initial review, because of its prevalence in the data. However, upon continued review of the codes, it appeared that this code did not add any value or meaning to the theme already organized in the data and was discarded. When participants spoke about Bumble, they simply mentioned it as the platform they met their partner, but did not describe anything

significant about how meeting on Bumble in particular influenced their perception of meeting online as stigmatized or not, nor did it seem to affect whether or not those participants shared their stories of meeting online.

Reviewing themes. Reviewing themes in a thematic approach includes comparing theme frequencies and identifying themes that co-occur (Saldana, 2009). During this phase, themes were refined as some initial themes did not have enough data, or data that was too divergent to be supported was not included. I explored themes to assess which ones might be combined, and which ones might be best separated into sub-themes. I searched for themes both within each question, and among the entire data set.

In thematic analysis, categories or themes should be judged based on internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, meaning data within themes should be coherent, and distinct from other themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). This stage involved reviewing all the coded data extracts from one theme to ensure coherence, reviewing the entire data set to assess the validity of the themes, and reflecting on the thematic map to ensure it accurately reflected meanings in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). In the final stage of reviewing themes, I re-read the entire data set (including the raw data, the initial codes and categories, my memos and notes from the follow-up interviews) and considered whether the themes fit with the data and coded any additional data within themes that may have been missed. I had initially created a category named *online vs offline*, which was tagged in five participants' responses, largely in the context of comparing aspects of online and offline dating. In reviewing this category in the context of the larger themes and research questions, I realized that these references were pointing to differences in online and offline dating that described benefits or drawbacks. Thus, I subsumed this category into the *benefits of meeting online* theme since most comparisons in these excerpts favored

online meetings. I also subsumed codes like *boring story*, into the more encompassing code and then theme of *wanting a better story*.

Defining and naming themes. After the thematic map had been satisfactorily completed, I considered how the themes may be refined or re-named based on how they fit in with the study's overarching research questions and theoretical frameworks. I considered the essence of each of them, the prevalence, and the saturation of each theme, as well as the various aspects of data that they each captured. I went back into each theme's data extracts, organizing them into a consistent account of the overall thematic narrative. During this stage, I wrote a memo about what I found interesting about the themes and why. For example, I found it interesting that some participants had extremely harsh and strong opinions about Craigslist in particular. As well, I found it interesting that participants who identified as Black or African American spoke about their intersection of identities playing such a significant role in their decision to share their stories.

Producing a final report. In this final stage of analysis, themes were fully fleshed out and a write-up of the analysis was produced. The goal of the final report is to tell the "complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 23). I produced a report that included data extracts for each theme and provided a coherent and interesting story of themes found in the data. Data extracts identified captured the essence of each them, in a clear and simple way. Finally, themes were considered and described in the context of the study's research questions, analytic narrative, and clinical context.

Rigor

Qualitative research focuses on the meanings people have. The concept of rigor is associated with *fidelity*, how well we understand participants' experiences in words and actions (Gilgun, 2005). In qualitative research, trustworthiness is an indicator of rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to have a rigorous methodological study, trustworthiness must be established. Trustworthiness can be established by creating an audit trail. In the current study, memos about the context of the study and methodological decisions, data analysis procedures, and reflexivity of the researcher were maintained (Lincoln & Guba (1985).

Credibility

Credibility as a methodological concept is comparable to establishing internal validity in quantitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A credible study presents "faithful" descriptions of people's experiences, which is enhanced when researchers engage in reflexivity and document the subjectivity of their interpretations. Credibility was established in the current study by engaging in reflexive memoing and accounting for my own experiences of meeting partners online and sharing stories of meeting those partners. As well, I brought back data to five participants to verify that themes in their responses were truly reflective of their experiences, and the meanings they attributed to them. I did this during follow-up interviews over the phone and in-person. Credibility was also ensured by debriefing with my peers and the student working with me. In order to further minimize bias, debriefing with peers included an exploration of my preference for certain kinds of evidence, interpretations, explanations, and potential blind spots and omissions. For example, I noticed that I was more interested in responses that confirmed my bias that people felt meeting online was stigmatized, and less interested in the perceptions of people who felt as though meeting a partner online was no longer stigmatized at all. I accounted

for this by re-reading the responses of participants who felt less stigma and ensuring their experiences were reflected accurately in the resulting codes, categories, and themes.

Further, self-reflexive exercises like journaling and memoing throughout the data collection and analysis process helped identify some of my personal biases and enhanced credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Firstly, to cope with and minimize bias, I began with a careful consideration of myself as a researcher and my relationship to my research topic (CARE, 1994). I wrote notes during initial reviews of the data and as codes and themes emerge, recording my impressions and initial interpretations. In reflecting on my own personal biases, I realized that I have to fight against my own personal perceptions of stigma in meeting a partner online to be as objective with the data as possible, and assume a *not-knowing* stance (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6) when reviewing the data.

Transferability

Transferability is a key component in establishing rigor, trustworthiness, and credibility. Transferability is comparable to applicability in quantitative research and depends on whether research findings can be contextualized outside of the study and on whether other people find the data applicable to their own experiences (Sandelowski, 1986). Transferability also depends on the original context being described accurately by the researcher. I achieved transferability in my study by having five participants provide detailed descriptions and probing them to expand on their meaning in follow-up interviews. Transferability was also achieved with purposeful sampling (Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015) and I sampled from participants who have experience meeting a partner online in the past five years. Since my sample are from diverse geographic locations, it is more broadly transferable to a general population.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research also contributes to the rigor, trustworthiness, and credibility of a study. Dependability is comparable to consistency in quantitative research. To maintain a sense of dependability, the research process should be audited (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), which means another researcher could clearly follow my decision trail and arrive at the same or comparable conclusions. I accounted for dependability in the current study by employing a code-recode strategy and having the graduation student I worked with code the first sections of the data (first 20 responses) to ensure consistency in the nature of codes and themes as they emerged early on. For example, while she chose some different words in the initial stage, the meaning of the codes fit into more inclusive codes in the second stage. For example, she identified an excerpt (“We usually laugh when people ask and tell them, if they are someone we already know”) and coded it as *familiarity*. I coded this same excerpt as *trusted confidants* and *familiarity* was identified as a component of feeling as if individuals can trust someone enough to tell them the full truth of their story.

To ensure dependability, I also clearly documented points where research decisions were made and theoretical influences and personal biases were present throughout the process, mostly in memos. For example, decisions about survey questions were made based on feedback I got from 2 peers who piloted the survey for me. I noticed that the survey questions did not elicit a rich enough description from one peer and so I modified a few questions and gave examples of the type of experiences I was interested in hearing about. For example, initially I did not include an examples when I asked participants if they perceived the platform they met on as influencing how they shared their story. One of my peers did not understand the question and so in

modifying the survey I elaborated and gave the example of “(Craigslist vs OKCupid, Tinder vs Bumble, Sims vs World of Warcraft, Instagram vs Snapchat, etc.)”.

To ensure dependability, I made my biases and assumptions clear when memoing about the emergence of codes and justification of themes in the data. For example, when conceptualizing the research and survey questions, and thinking about how they fit into my theoretical framework, I wondered how much I should focus on shame and social stigma as a concept that I expect to find in the data. I have personally felt that meeting someone online is stigmatized, and close friends have shared similar sentiments with me over the years, as well I have concealed meeting a partner online in the past. I have had discussions with partners about how we would tell people we met, because even though it was not said outright, clearly we had an issue telling people that we met online. Initially, I had planned to first ask participants “How does stigma of meeting someone online influence the way you feel about how you met your partner and the way you tell the story of meeting? In accounting for my own assumptions about the presence of stigma, I realized I needed to ask a qualifying question before I asked this question, and so I added the forced-response questions “In general, do you feel that meeting a partner online is at all socially stigmatized?” If respondents answered yes, then they could respond to the aforementioned question. However, if they answer no, they were then asked to “Please describe why you believe meeting a partner online is not socially stigmatized”. As well, I was very aware that as the data was reported, I was more interested in the responses that confirmed my assumptions, i.e. that people felt stigmatized for meeting online and concealed the stories to account for that stigma. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to re-read those excerpts that challenged my assumptions and tried to understand the deeper meaning associated with

people's experiences of embracing their stories and having positive perceptions of meeting a partner online.

Chapter 4: Results

The results of this study included all data collected from all participants and follow-up interviews with selected participants. The findings are organized by the five overarching themes that emerged through my analysis. I identified and shared excerpts from the text that best exemplified the codes and themes discussed herein. In general, I found participants perceived that a *general stigma persists* about meeting a partner online. While many participants spoke about the stigma of online dating as disappearing or lessening, there was a significant consensus that meeting a partner online was still generally stigmatized. Participants largely reported feeling more comfortable and embraced their story of meeting online if they were sharing with a *trusted audience*. As well, participants were more likely to conceal the story if the audience was not perceived to be trusted, or trusted to understand their story and not pass judgement. Participants described the size and environment of an audience and their characteristics, including their generation, and their perceived worldviews as influencing the likelihood of sharing their story of meeting online. Another significant theme in the data centered around participants' individual characteristics. *Intersections of identity* were perceived to influence the way people thought about online dating as stigmatized and whether or not they concealed their stories of meeting online. Specifically, race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation were perceived to influence the likelihood of disclosing a relationship that began online. *Platform hierarchy* arose as a consistent theme in the data as well; many participants described sites perceived to be for "hook ups" as the most stigmatized and the most likely to be concealed. Lastly, the *benefits of meeting online* emerged as a theme throughout the analysis when participants were asked to reflect on how they perceived meeting online as influencing their relationship satisfaction.

General Stigma Persists

Primarily, when asked about the role of social stigma in sharing their stories of meeting a partner online, many participants described feeling generally awkward, uncomfortable and embarrassed sharing specific details of the story. Participants perceived social stigma as having a range of influences, both on the way they felt about their story itself and on the way they shared their story with others. Responses ranged from perceptions that stigma had no influence at all to a very significant influence, with most participants reporting that it influences the way they tell their story in one way or another.

I used two force-response questions to measure the prevalence of perceptions of stigma and the rates at which people report having overt conversations about telling their story with their partner. In response to one of the two forced-response survey questions, “In general, do you feel that meeting a partner online is at all socially stigmatized?”, 30 respondents answered “no” and 80 respondents answered “yes”. There was no significant difference among male or female participants or those over and under the age of 40. Participants that answered “no” generally felt as though meeting a partner online had become a much more commonplace and acceptable form of meeting a partner, particularly among younger generations. For example, one participant said, “So many people have done it these days that it just doesn't seem odd to me or most that I know”. Those who answered “yes” generally felt that while meeting a partner was indeed becoming more commonplace and acceptable among younger generations, there were still stigma and negative associations made with meeting a partner online. Some participant said, “The social stigma has a huge part in how I tell people my story”, “I personally felt embarrassed about how we met for a long time” and “I feel bad about telling people about the relationship and how we met”. When asked about the influence of social stigma on the way they tell their story,

participants often spoke about how it once influenced the way they told their story, but that perceived stigma had become less prominent over the years. For example, one participant said:

I think the stigma about meeting online has lessened over the years, and I know a few people who have met and even gotten married (like us). At first, I definitely felt like a loser for having to go to an online dating website because I had no trouble finding and going on dates before. When people ask how my husband and I met, they often respond with “Ohhh!” when I tell them. Then they sometimes feel the need to backtrack and say something like, “Oh, lots of people do that now,” and “My family member met their spouse online”.

Many participants felt as though their relationships were judged or perceived as less legitimate because they began online. They reported feeling judged, or being fearful of being judged, generally uncomfortable, awkward or embarrassed at the thought of sharing the details of their stories with others. For example, one participant said, “My partner and I have told many different stories of how we met because of the social stigma and out of fear of judgement from others”. Another said, “I have to treat the fact that I used okcupid as a joke to begin the story to avoid some people's quick judgements of it (or maybe my own perception of people's judgement)”. This fear of judgment was particularly strong when participants described sharing their stories with older family members, larger groups of people, or people with conservative, traditional, or religious worldviews. For example, one participant said,

I definitely tread carefully when telling the story. I won't tell it in larger groups or to people I don't know well as I feel I can be stereotyped or generalized as a person I'm not by saying I met someone on okcupid.

Sharing story. Depending on how participants experienced stigma, they described a range of processes involved in both discussing the story with their partner and sharing it with others. Participants often spoke about having overt conversations with their partner about how they met. Some participants' discussions were very brief and frank. For example, one said, "It was fairly simple. We both immediately agreed we didn't want to be open about it so we left out the online interaction and just said we met at a coffee shop". A handful of other participants reported feeling like they were on the same page as their partner and quickly agreed to either tell the truth or fabricate a story about their meeting. Other participants described negotiating the specifics of who would share the story under certain circumstances, even adapting and re-negotiating their story over the course of their relationships. For example, one participant said, "We had agreed on saying we met through friends. Later we adapted it to say we met online, but did not provide the exact site".

On the far end of the spectrum, for those respondents who reported feeling embarrassed or ashamed to tell their stories, they would often fabricate stories about how they met. They would sometimes tell others that they met their partner in the same venue where they had scheduled their first date *after* initially meeting online (i.e., they would tell people "we met at a coffee shop", when in reality they met on Tinder and then planned to then meet at a coffee shop). This finding was not relatively significant, but rather it appears to be strategy that is easy to agree on because it is a stretch of the truth and not an untruth. Some participants described more intricate strategies to ensure that the appropriate story was given to the appropriate audience. For example, one participant said:

I honestly don't remember how it came about, but we did nail down what we would tell his family before we met them (which was the "we met at the restaurant" story). In

situations where we hadn't previously discussed what the story would be, we let whoever's family/friends we are around take the lead. So, if we're with his friends, I let him decide how to tell the story of how we met, and vice versa.

Given that excess stress is found in people with concealable stigmas, it would be easy to imagine a situation wherein this participant and her partner were amongst friends of both of theirs, causing them to make a decision to conceal or make visible their stigmatized statuses as “online daters”. Thus, concealing their stigmatized status was a protective mechanism, but could also produce a fear of being discovered. A few other participants utilized similar strategies and gave the impression that managing the specifics of who gets what story can feel exhausting and stressful, and make their partner feel uncomfortable. For example, one participant said “... I asked my partner to allow me to do the talking with my family because I did not want him to feel uncomfortable lying to them and so I just did it”.

Trusted Audience

Regardless of the extent of stigma participants felt, overwhelmingly they reported that they were more likely to share the full story of their meeting (including the specific platform where they met), if they felt they were speaking with an audience they could trust, one they felt close to, and more ideally, one that had experienced meeting a partner online themselves. The more participants sensed that the people they were sharing their stories with had experience with online dating themselves, the more likely they were to share the true story, in its entirety. Participants reported feeling much less judged by others who had shared their experiences.

Throughout the data, many participants spoke about feeling comfortable sharing their story if they were talking to this *trusted audience*. Participant often reported that they were more likely to tell others they met their partner online if they were in an environment with close

friends or a trusted audience, or in one that simply felt “safe”. Participants often said things like “I only tell close friends how we met. I would never discuss it at an informal gathering” or “I do not tell the story unless i feel i am in a safe environment”. Some feared being judged amongst an audience that was unknown. For example, one participant said:

I definitely tread carefully when telling the story. I won't tell it in larger groups or to people I don't know well as I feel I can be stereotyped or generalized as a person I'm not by saying I met someone on OKCupid”.

Participants also felt safer sharing with an audience that would keep their story private. For example, one said, “I tell some friends the truth and others I choose to omit the truth from depending on the likelihood of them knowing my family members and telling them/of them judging us”.

Respondents often felt the need to fabricate, qualify, or justify their stories when they were among the following groups of people: older family members, large groups of people, older adults in general, and people with whom they did not feel close to or trust. With family, many respondents felt particularly hesitant to share their online meetings with older members and those who were perceived to be conservative, traditional, or religious. Meeting a partner online was perceived to be something that violated traditional and appropriate modes of courtship by many of these family members. For example, one participant said, “They will say they are a traditional conservative type family and they are quite religious. So our meeting doesn't fit what they believe to be proper dating.” Some respondents also spoke about online dating as clashing with their family’s values or culture. The perception seemed to be that meeting a partner online was for intended for casual sex or something illegitimate and did not produce “real” relationships.

One participant described her family as one who would “jump to conclusions about meeting online, thinking people meeting online are only looking to hook up”.

Other participants described their families as accepting of meeting their partner online. Some of the key differences in families described as accepted were generally discussed and perceived as open and “up on the times”. Accepting families were also perceived as families where other members may have also had experiences meeting partners online. Many families described as accepting were also described as putting their participants’ happiness and relationship satisfaction above any judgments or concerns about how or where the relationship started.

Social stigma was perceived to influence the way respondents told their stories mostly with those who felt that their families were disapproving. Disapproving families were often described as being concerned about the safety of meeting someone online and the legitimacy of a relationship that began online. Many disapproving families were also described as families that simply did not understand the medium. These families could be described as generally not understanding of or familiar with online dating, cautious of online dating because of the risk factors perceived to be involved, or judgmental about online dating because of the perception that it is a non-traditional or illegitimate way to meet a suitable partner. Families were particularly concerned about safety and confirming their potential dates’ identity and background.

Participants were most likely to fabricate stories about meeting their partners when they perceived their families as disapproving or concerned. Specifically, older family members were lied to most often about how they met their partners. Many participants also believed that older

family members in particular would not understand online platforms and their misunderstanding would lead to undo stress on the participants.

Safety was a big theme amongst those respondents who reported fabricating stories. Many reported that they felt it was simply easier to fabricate stories to friends and family who might be concerned about them meeting someone dangerous online because they felt like it was just easier. They would sometimes modify their story by being vague and saying they met online generally, not mentioning specific sites. This was particularly true if they met on sites like Craigslist or Tinder that are considered to be more “hook-up” sites and places where you are more likely to meet someone who is dangerous or has ill intentions.

If participants reported feeling stigma from meeting their partner online, they were also more likely to qualify or justify their meeting. Some qualified their statements by explaining that online dating was the only means they had to finding a partner, either because of their location or other individual characteristics. Some participants would also justify meeting a partner online by explaining that they were considered “normal” and attractive by societal standards, and could otherwise find a date offline. For example, one respondent said, “Sometimes we feel it's necessary to give more detail to somehow justify our meeting” and another said “However, when I talk with other people about how we met, I always qualify it with, "I'm working on not being embarrassed when I say we met online ... ”.

Some participants seemed to assume that people who meet their partners online are not attractive or “normal”. One participant described feeling like an anomaly in the online dating realm, she said, “We are both good looking, normal people and everyone says we got lucky and can't believe it”. There was a also real sense that some participants had to emphasize their competence at dating offline, that the assumptions was if they were online, they did not know

how to date in the “real world” or meeting someone offline. For example, one participant said, “I have never had issues meeting boys or socializing so I'm not really embarrassed by it. I usually laugh it off.”

For those who reported that stigma did *not* influence the way they told their story, they largely were honest with most people and told the truth of how they met. Some respondents who felt that meeting online was a perfectly acceptable and common way to meet embraced the story of how they met and often sometimes even found it humorous or empowering and embraced the online component of their courtship story. For many of these people, honesty was important, and a few of them felt a responsibility to be honest in order to shatter the stigma that they know is out there about meeting online. One said, “I actually enjoy telling our story even though I think there is a social stigma about meeting someone online. Because our relationship worked, so hopefully it will break down the barriers for others”. There was no apparent hierarchy in how participants described their relationship “working”; i.e. it was not apparent that participants who were married attributed their relationship working to being married, however there was an emphasis on the time that people reported being in a couple. For example, if couples reported being together for a long time, as a married couple or as partnered, they were more likely to downplay meeting online or make it less of an issue. One participant who was married said, “At first we didn't tell our families that we met online. Now we don't worry about it and answer honestly when asked. Part of that could be that we've been together so long, how we met is irrelevant.”

Some participants, who were undecided about telling others that they met their partner online, often described becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea of sharing over the years. Many attributed this increasing acceptance to a general feeling that meeting online had become acceptable. Others attributed their increased acceptance to an increased sense of security

in their relationships, describing their meeting as insignificant compared to the years spent together and the solid foundation of their relationship.

Approximately one fifth of participants also described using humor to tell the story of how they met, either because they genuinely felt it was humorous, or they used humor to soften an otherwise embarrassing story. For example, one participant said, “If we are together, one of us makes a joke about how we met before telling the real story”. Others said, “The both of us take turns initiating the conversation or we’ll start to randomly talk about it and joke about certain points” and “”. Some participants also just found it humorous to meet in a seemingly random and relatively novel way. For example, one said, “I am usually laughing very hysterically and making jokes such as ‘I thought I was getting catfished’².”

Embracing or concealing story. When asked the second of two forced-response questions in the online survey, “Have you discussed and/or negotiated the ‘story of how we met’ with your partner?” Fifty-six participants said “yes” and 54 participants said “no”. Those who responded “no” were generally those participants who described feeling like meeting a partner online had become more socially acceptable and in essence did not warrant any type of conversation wherein negotiations would be made about how to share the story. Those that said “no” also spoke about honest and truth being important parts of who they were. For example, one participant said

We are both straightforward, honest people. If we were intensely embarrassed about how we met, maybe we would have come up with another story, but I think we both just expect the other to tell the truth in pretty much all situations.

Another participant said, “It would be too stressful to deviate that much from the truth”.

² A colloquial term for luring someone into a relationship by using a fictional online persona.

Interestingly, some participants who answered “no” revealed that they did in fact have some sort of discussion or negotiation with their partner. For example, some of those who responded “no” said, “We kind of censor if needed. As we go along based on the audience”, and, “Well we have discussed it but not negotiated it”. Others spoke of not needing to overtly discuss or negotiate the story because they perceived an inherent understanding with their partner of places and people that were appropriate to share their full story. One participant said:

We are both capable of reading a situation and deciding whether to bring up the fact that we matched on Tinder. Since we do have another true half to the story, we haven't needed to discuss the versions we tell people.

Other participants spoke about being happy in their relationship as a reason not to discuss or negotiate their story of meeting and said, “Because we both tell it like happened. We are happy and proud”. Another participant said they had not discussed their story, but have not discussed modifications to the story that they share, for example, “We have laughed about it, and talked about it, but I've never asked him why he only tells the abbreviated version”.

Participants who responded “yes” that they have discussed or negotiated the story of meeting online reported a range, but generally described either modifying their story in part (generally to exclude the specific platform wherein they met) or to jointly construe an alternative meeting story. While some participants approached the conversation with hesitation or skirted around the issue, others used humor or joked about broaching the topic. Further, many others approached the conversation directly and were resolute in the stories they were prepared to share, with little room for negotiation.

A lot of participants spoke about being vague when sharing the story of meeting their partner online and say that they generally “met online”. For example, one said, “He asked me, so

what are we saying when they ask us how we met? The agreement was to just say we met online without details of the platform and after while we decided just to tell the whole story”.

Participants also spoke about using humor to have the discussion or negotiation and said, “It wasn't so much negotiation, but it was banter, back and forth that we did for the first time and we liked what we were saying that we just kept it and modified slightly here and there”. Other respondents who did not feel that there was much to discuss said, “It was fairly simple. We both immediately agreed we didn't want to be open about it so we left out the online interaction and just said we met at a coffee shop”. Another said, “In the beginning I mentioned that I didn't want to tell certain family members that we met online. He was in agreement and we have always told his family it was a chance meeting in the café”.

Some participants said that as a couple, they decided not to come to any consensus and let each other tell their own individual stories, such as “We both did what we wanted in terms of telling our families and friends”. Others came up multiple versions of the story, such as “Who we shared with was the main discussion. His family received the edited version starting in Starbucks, while my family received the whole story”. Other participants also spoke about their story evolving or adapting over time; one participant said, “I was the one who initiated. We had agreed on saying we met through friends. Later we adapted it to say we met online, but did not provide the exact site. He was fine with it and understood my concerns”. Other respondents had even more intricate strategies to monitor their story in certain environments and amongst certain people; one respondent said:

I honestly don't remember how it came about, but we did nail down what we would tell his family before we met them (which was the "we met at the restaurant" story). In situations where we hadn't previously discussed what the story would be, we let

whoever's family/friends we are around take the lead. So, if we're with his friends, I let him decide how to tell the story of how we met, and vice versa.

While some participants spoke about the excess stress of maintaining versions of their stories, themes identified among discussions and negotiations of the story did not include anything overtly negative about how the story would be told. However, there were instances wherein couples were aware that fabricating and modifying stories would put their partner in an uncomfortable situation. For example, one respondent said,

I initiated the conversation. It was short and I asked my partner to allow me to do the talking with my family because I did not want him to feel uncomfortable lying to them and so I just did it. He didn't seem to dislike the idea and said that he understood my reasoning behind wanting to lie.

Overall, it appeared as though most couples were in some agreement about how they should share their stories, who they should share it with, and in what contexts they should share it. However, there were a handful of participants who described negotiating their stories or disagreeing about what stories should be shared.

Social environments. Participants often spoke about feeling stigmatized in certain environments, namely those of a professional nature or those with people who were older and lacked experience with meeting a partner online. They were more likely to fabricate stories at work or in professional settings with colleagues. Some felt that meeting a partner online would not reflect well on their professional identity. One participant said, "If I'm around coworkers, I don't tell them how we met". Many participants also had something general to say like "I would say more what affects how I tell this story is who is gathering and what age they are and what my relation to them is".

Intersections of Identity

Participants described various aspects of their individual characteristics that influenced the way they both perceived stigma and shared their story of meeting online. Primarily, the participants perceived the following aspects of their identity as influencing the way they told their story: race and ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, and personality traits. Some participants also spoke about the intersection of these identities, primarily the intersections of race and sexual orientation as influencing the way they shared their story.

Race and ethnicity. Some participants perceived their race or ethnicity to influence the way they told their stories. Specifically, a handful of participants who identified as Black/African American, Hispanic, and Asian perceived their race or ethnicity to influence how they shared the story of meeting their partner online. For example, one participant said, “Since I am black, I am more inclined to say that we met through mutual friends. Only our closest friends know exactly how we met”. A follow-up interview with a female participant who identified as African American elaborated on the role of race in sharing her story and said, “Black people might be less likely to say they met online because there is this fear of being exposed... of putting yourself ‘out there’.. you’re just too used to worrying about what people think of you”.

For participants who described themselves as White or Caucasian, some felt their racial identity made it easier for them to share, while others did not perceive their whiteness as privileging their experience. For those who felt as though their privileged status helped them to share their story, they described their racial identity as contributing to a greater sense of acceptance for meeting their partner online. One participant said, “I suppose since I am white and educated and living in NYC, where online dating is the norm, I don't think much of it.” Alternatively, one White participant described her whiteness as part of a hindrance and said, “I

think that being a white female (i.e. 'basic white girl') made it harder at the beginning to tell people”.

There was also a perception of that national identity influenced the way a few participants shared their story. One Asian-American participant said, “I tend to feel more comfortable telling Americans about my story because Asian culture is more conservative and online dating is always related to one-night-stand kind of thing”. Further, a difference in understands between cultures in different countries was described as being influential; one participant said:

The only thing that influences the way I tell the story of meeting my partner online is my ethnicity/race because we come from different countries, which I think makes me a little more reticent. It feels like an extra layer of stigma to work through in addition to that which accompanies the online meeting.

Gender. A handful of younger female participants spoke about gender being a factor in the way they tell their story. They described feeling as if meeting online was less acceptable or favorable for women because of safety concerns, implying that women were perceived as not having the ability to protect themselves. For example, one participant said that her gender influences whom she tells about meeting her partner online: “I would say gender plays a role. I didn't want to get lectured about how I needed to be more careful as a female”. Another participant said, “I think it is more acceptable for a man to meet a partner online than a woman, so I tell less people.” Another participant spoke about how she had to qualify her story to account for assumptions about gender:

Sometimes my gender leads to me bringing up the fact that before the first date I texted a friend to say where I was going and that it was an online date, so she could tell the police where to start the investigation if I went missing.

Other respondents reinforced this idea that because they are female, they have to explain how they maintained personal safety.

Religion. Some participants perceived religious beliefs and affiliations as influencing the way they and their families felt about meeting a partner online, as well as how an audience's religious affiliation would influence the way participants' stories are told. Descriptions about the influence of religion on the telling the story ranged from the vague to the resolute. In describing the role of religion, some participants were resolute: one said, "I would never tell someone who is religious" and another said, "My family is very religious so I would never tell them I met someone on tinder." One respondent very emphatically pointed to religion as a factor in sharing details of meeting a partner online and said:

We met 11 years ago, before I went to college, when my income level was much lower, and when I was still religious. At that time, I was less apt to openly talk about how we met, mainly because of the social stigma associated with my religion (and having only been separated, not divorced, when we started dating). I have since abandoned religion, completed four years of education, and have nearly doubled my income. Not sure if any of those factors influence my openness about how we met, but if any do, it would be the leaving behind of religion.

Other participants simply modified their stories if their families were perceived as being moderately religious. For example, one participant said, "My family is relatively traditional and Catholic so I rarely tell them details of my online dating presence." A handful of respondents also described religion as having little to no impact on the way they tell their story, particularly with family. One said, "My family is super conservative Christian, but it doesn't impact the way I tell them how we met". Another said, "My parent's religious beliefs are not strong or stalwart;

they are very flexible, so my choices wouldn't cause them too much concern, when it comes to religion at least”.

Sexual orientation. A common theme amongst participants who identified as LGBTQ was acceptance in the gay community of meeting online, or at least acknowledgement that meeting a partner online is more commonplace in the gay community. For example, one participant said, “Around other gay men I just saw we met on Grindr as they are all familiar.” Another theme was that meeting online was a discreet way to connect with other members of the LGBTQ community who are either closeted or discreet about their sexual orientation. For example, one man said about meeting someone online “He contacted me through craigslist. We met that way because I am a very discreet bisexual”. Others simply described being gay as a protective factor: “Being a gay man actually makes it easier to tell the story considering how many gay men do meet each other online these days –“.

Participants also spoke about being among an audience of other members of the LGBTQ community made it easier for some participants to share their story. For example, one said, “If we were to tell other people who are part of the LGBT+ group we generally tell the whole story as we don't feel as stigmatized”. Another modified the story if they were among a straight audience: “If it's a group of straight people I would usually say we met online and not go in to details”. One female respondent made an interesting spoke about parallel experiences of lesbian women:

Being a lesbian is different. I think that we (the in group of lesbians) all recognize that when your dating pool is limited to only 2% of the population, you can't be picky about the venue you use to meet someone. Skeevey gay bar? Fine! That one community center that hosts a feminist book club once a quarter? Tres romantic! Tinder? There's a critical

mass of "us", and so it's actually a legitimate way to look for a serious mate. Tinder is simultaneously the lesbian answer to Grindr (in that it's where people go if they are looking for casual sex), Match.com (in that it's where people go if they are looking to get married), Bumble, and more. It's where the ladies are, and we beggars can't be choosers. There was an interesting intersection between race and sexual orientation that a few gay male participants described. One, who was acutely aware of how his White privilege helps him tell his story, and how his partner's blackness hinders his ability to share his. He said:

I tend to tell the story to straight people as 'we met on a dating site'. Which....Is not exactly a lie. To gay people I tell them we met for sex and hit it off. I'm white and I am a bit more open with straight people than my boyfriend, who is black. He would tend to tell people we just know each other from "around town" or something similar. So I guess my whiteness allows me a bit more space to be forthcoming in this case.

Given that homosexuality was illegal in many places historically, and continues to be criminalized, the LGBT community has historically used covert means to find a partner. According to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's (2016) report on *State Sponsored Homophobia*, same-sex sexual contact is still a criminal offense in 74 countries around the world. Homosexuality is also a criminal offense punishable by death in 12 countries, largely in Africa and the Middle East. Thus, meeting partners online for some in the LGBT community is a necessary means of being covert. Less stigmatized attitudes about meeting online were present with participants who described themselves as LGBT.

Geographic location. Participants also spoke about their geographic location influencing the way they perceive stigma. Many respondents who reported living in a city or urban area described the common usage and acceptance of meeting online. One participant said, "I have

also found that urban people are less judgmental when I tell them I use a dating app, often they do as well.. Interesting, participants from rural areas described online platforms as necessary for meeting people, however people from rural areas were perceived as being less accepting of meeting online. For example, while one participant said “we were living in a rural-ish area so it seemed like a logical way to meet people”, another said, “I believe my current area of residence influences this situation the greatest. We live in a more rural area of the state where some individuals view social media relationships in a negative light”. This contradiction of terms, that online platforms are more necessary in rural areas with less people and less options, and yet people in rural communities are more judgmental of online platform, warrants further inquiry.

Age. Most participants also described their own age and the age of their audience as being a factor in the way they tell their story. A majority of participants described a “generational divide” among younger and older generations, among digital natives and digital immigrants. Many participants described the generational divide in terms of their own family; one said, “If I am speaking to people my own age who also know use dating apps, then I am more inclined to share that that is how I met someone. I would never tell someone who is religious or about my parent’s age (55 or older) that I met on a dating app.” Others specifically defined “older generations” with specific age limits: “For people under the age of 35, I don't feel any social stigma explaining how my husband and I met”; “If I am speaking to someone 40 or younger I think they are more understanding of online dating. I feel the older generations tend to have a harder time understanding an online scene, as it's outside of their realm”.

Education. Some participants described education level as being a factor in how they discussed their story. For example, one participant spoke about her education level being a part of the reason she perceives meeting a partner online as socially acceptable; she said “I suppose

since I am white and educated and living in NYC, where online dating is the norm, I don't think much of it.”. Conversely, another participant indicated that having a certain level of education and working in higher education actually makes meeting a partner online more stigmatizing; she says “Well, I'm a professor, and so it is even more embarrassing to say you met someone online that you are now dating...” However, there were no significant relationships between education-level and perceptions of stigma or the way participants shared their stories.

Social class. A few participants also spoke about social class influencing the way they perceived being accepted for meeting a partner online. One participant, when discussing the role of stigma in telling her story said, “It mainly shaped the way I told others of a similar middle class upbringing.” Another participant described his identity, including his privileged social status, as a component of his ability to share his story; he said, “As a middle aged middle class cisgender White couple with a decade long marriage, I think we're able to tell our story without any fear of judgment. I'm not sure everyone has that privilege.”

Platform Hierarchy

Many participants described the particular platform they used as influencing the way they felt about meeting their partner online, and the way they shared their story and with whom. Meeting on certain platforms, namely Tinder and Craigslist, was perceived as being a tawdry, illegitimate way of meeting, and an unacceptable story to share with certain people and in certain contexts, if at all. In most cases, Craigslist was seen as the most illegitimate platform. One respondent said they would share they met their partner on Tinder, but “would never ever tell someone I met them on Craigslist”.

Participants generally described apps like Tinder, Grindr, and Craigslist as the platforms they would be more embarrassed to have met their partner, and more ashamed to share with

others (however, there were a handful of participants who described Tinder as an increasingly acceptable apt to find a legitimate relationship, particularly for a younger generation). Sites like Match.com, eHarmony, OKCupid, and Bumble were considered more “legitimate” platforms, those that you could share with less embarrassment and more legitimacy.

Some participants made qualifying statements about legitimate platforms that indicate those were the platform that were paid or subscription-based were more legitimate than the hook-up platforms that are generally free. It seems reasonable to assume that if you pay for a site, you have a deeper sense of investment in finding someone. Perhaps there is an economic consideration as well; people who can afford to pay for subscriptions to online platforms may be perceived as having more legitimate relationships. This line of inquiry warrants further investigation and was not fully understood through the data.

Benefits of Meeting Online

In general, many participants did not perceive meeting their partner online as influencing their current relationship satisfactions. However, many participants also described the benefits or drawbacks of meeting online, the majority of which focused on the benefits and the positive aspects of meeting online. Many respondents felt that meeting their partner online helped them to get to know their partners better during their initial courtship and that that they were forced (in a way) to establish an emotional and psychological connection without physical intimacy by getting to know each other online.

Participants who felt positively about meeting their partner online generally described how the platform helped them to meet a variety of people where they may have otherwise not met someone. This either was because they were too busy or were living in a region where it was not practical to find a partner through more traditional means (i.e. through the community,

church, bars, libraries, etc.). Many participants also spoke about preferring the online platform for the amount of time and space it gave them and their partner to develop a relationship at their preferred pace. In a follow up interview with one participant, she said:

I'm an introverted person, and it takes me a lot of time to warm up to someone. Meeting someone online helps me feel like I know someone more intimately before we meet because we have talked, we have read each other's profiles to make sure that our religious and political views are in line and that there are no red flags or deal breakers that are clear right away. I'm also somewhat of a lexophile and I really like being able to have a dialogue with someone before we take the next step. It is very important to me that my partner knows how to write well and communicate in a style I vibe with before we move things along.

Many participants spoke about the pragmatic aspects of meeting online, largely that it is a convenient way to meet someone when the demands of work and childcare inhibit people's ability to go seek partners offline (e.g., in church, at bars). One participant simply said, "I am a single mom and don't have time for "dating" in any traditional way" and another said "Today's society is so busy that meeting somebody is getting harder and harder". Participants also spoke about online platforms providing dating pools of people that would never have had the option of meeting. They appreciated about how much were able to personalize and filter through potential partners online.

Approximately half of participants also felt that meeting someone online gave them the ability to meet someone "tailor made" for their personality and preferences. Many participants also described the convenience of meeting a partner online as a significant reason they use the platform. Many participants spoke about not having the time or the resources to go out to meet

someone offline, either because they were geographically isolated, or did not have the time in their schedules to go out and survey the local bar scenes. Others reported not being able to afford associated expenses of dating offline (i.e., going to bars and paying for drinks). Participants described online dating as a pragmatic choice to meet someone in today's digital culture. Some respondents also spoke about online dating as a way to find a partner from a specific dating pool. For example, one respondent said, "My religion had a large influence on seeking out a partner, as I wanted to find someone who had similar values and outlooks. When I mention that to people they seem to understand my reasons for looking online".

While online platforms were viewed as useful for many, some participants still spoke about meeting a partner online as a "last resort", because they were unable to successfully find a partner through traditional means, i.e. either meeting someone through family or community connections, or spontaneously at a bar or nightclub or library, etc. One participant said, "I suppose I tell in terms of desperation. Like hey I tried to do everything organically and failed so before I got too old I needed to give it a shot." Other participants also described a drawback to meeting online as the story itself. Some participants feeling like the story of their meeting or was "boring" or not exciting, and many expressed wishing they had a "better story" to tell.

Chapter 5: Discussion

MFT scholars have explored the significance of couples' views of how they met.

Buehlman et al. (1992) found that couples who tell the *story* of how they met in a negative light were less likely to stay together. In the current study, I focused on how individuals tell the story of how they met their partner online, and how they perceive stigma as influencing the way they discuss that story with their partner. The results I found underscore the need for clinicians to understand the role of social stigma in the way individuals and couples talk about meeting their partner online. For example, if an individual or couple discusses their online meeting with some hesitancy or discomfort during the assessment phase, or brings up their online meeting during a later phase of treatment as being problematic. While many participants spoke about the social stigma of meeting a partner online becoming lessened, many more spoke about social stigma playing some kind of role, sometimes significant, in how they discussed their story with their partner, and shared that story with others.

Symbolic Interactionism

People act based on the meaning they assign to things. You can see how people acted in ways by sharing, not-sharing, or partially sharing the truth of their story based on the meaning the assigned to other people's values, judgments, experiences, etc. As well, in general, participants acted upon the meaning of age and would generally only share their story if their audience was of a certain generation – thus age has a particular meaning for most participants, that a certain age means they will not be understood – as well, being perceived as traditional, religious, or conservative meant that participants acted in more covert or deceptive ways when sharing their story. We also make meaning of things based on our social interactions – it was clear how some participants chose to make meaning of something based on their interactions

with others particularly family – for example, one participant who often shares the partial truth of meeting her partner on Craigslist said,

My family is a big influence. They are really skeptical about online dating. I remember when someone once asked me how we met in front of her and she said "DON'T." That was an obvious indicator that she was embarrassed herself.

Blumer also thought that the meaning we give something is not permanent. This was reflected in many participants responses, when they spoke about how the meanings they assigned to their stories changed over time, or with new experiences. While symbolic interactionism is often thought of an incomplete theory in sociology, or as a complement to other theories that look at larger social systems – in this study I used this framework to explore the individual level of participants’ experiences, and I used narrative therapy (and it’s social constructionism foundation) to explore the larger societal narratives and discourses that influence those interactions.

I used this theory to examine the language and symbolic expressions that participants used to describe their perceptions of meeting a partner online. I analyzed the language (both literally and symbolically) they used to interpret their emotional tone. For example, I used the use of emoticons to interpret tone, I used the use of ellipses and exclamation For example, one participant said, “I suppose I tell in terms of desperation. Like hey I tried to do everything organically and failed so before I got too old I needed to give it a shot.” Using a symbolic interactionist understanding, *desperation* implies that one only meets partners online if they have lost all hope of meeting a partner *organically*, which symbolizes the naturalness of meeting in person, and thus the unnaturalness, or illegitimately of meeting online. That this participant also took on *desperation* as part of her identity is reflective in her use of the word *failed*. When you

identify as a *failure*, you believe you are not performing in an expected way. Thus, I assume that this participant feels as though she is expected to meet a partner offline, and meeting online is a failure of that expectation, and perhaps a reflection on her own sense of self-worth.

I used a symbolic interactionist framework to understand how meanings and interactions are reciprocal, specifically in asking participants to reflect on their family's influence on their perceptions of stigma. In asking participants to explore this relationship and process, I analyzed participants' responses in the context of their descriptions of family. As well, I looked at the reciprocity between participants' perceptions of stigma and their telling of stories. For example, if a participant reported feeling a sense of openness about sharing their story, I would consider the way they described their family and their family's own perception, and then re-consider the participant's response in the context of her family interactions over this topic.

General Stigma Persists

Shame. Greenberg and Goldman (2008) also described shame in a systemic lens, arguing that shame is feeling lacking in worth *through another's eyes*, and is most painful when one's partner is perceived as the person looking down on them. Using an emotionally focused couples therapy model, Greenberg and Goldman (2008) found that shame was a critical barrier to intimacy and described different types of shame - adaptive shame, primary maladaptive shame, and secondary shame. In the context of the current study, adaptive shame, which helps maintain group acceptance by not alienating themselves, manifested in people who conceal how they met their partner (i.e. they concealed meeting online to maintain acceptance among their friends and family and others). A few participants also experienced maladaptive shame, a core sense of self that is worthless or unacceptably flawed, when they described themselves as *desperate* or as one participant said "I decided to try an online dating website, even though I felt like kind of a loser

for doing so”. Lastly, some participants felt secondary shame, or the shame that is often comorbid with anxiety, or shame about internal experiences. For example, some participants reported feeling feelings of embarrassment associated with anxiety, particularly when sharing with older generations. One participant said, “I feel that telling our story to people around our age group (21-30) is much less anxiety provoking and more socially accepted.”

Family influence. Family influence was perceived in a range of ways and was clearly more valued by some participants than others. Some participants let their family’s perceptions of meeting online greatly influence the way they shared their story, in both open and closed way. Others (although to a lesser extent) did not let their family’s opinions about meeting their partner online affect the way they told their story of meeting.

Families that expressed disapproval over the ways participants met their partner were described as being concerned about safety issues, being conservative, traditional, or religious in values or beliefs, not understanding the legitimacy or popularity of meeting partners online, or being of an older generation. Families that expressed approval or acceptance with the way the participant met their partner generally expressed a sense of openness, liberalism, familiarity with online platforms, or were family members of a certain generation. Many respondents also reported that their families were much more likely to accept or approve of their meetings if their family showed affinity for their partner. These factors seemed to influence the way participants internalized their own feelings of stigma and their general sense of self-esteem in meaningful ways. Participants responded to the stress of feeling stigmatized and sharing this information with their family by being untruthful or fabricating stories about how people met their partner.

Research in the field of family studies has explored how families moderate the influence of social stigma on the psychological wellbeing on children, adolescents, and adult children

(Elizur, 2001). Research on families that experience social stigma has generally focused on those families with visible stigmas (based on race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, disability status, etc.) and found that families serve as protective factors against social stigma with warmth and acceptance, and as risk factors with shaming and rejection (Elizur, 2001; Bos & Gartrell, 2010). However, there is scant empirical research that address how families serve as protective factors for invisible stigmas, controllable stigmas, stigmas associated with behaviors that are chosen.

Trusted Audience

Overwhelming, participants reported being more likely to share their story of meeting their partner online if they felt as though they were an audience with whom they trust, and for whom their decisions about online dating were positively sanctioned. This confirms research that Custer et al. (2008) proposed, suggesting that couples whose relationships are not as “positively sanctioned” by society are more likely to adapt their courtship stories to their audience or environment (p. 461). When participants felt as their courtship stories were negatively sanctioned by their audience, either through misunderstanding, disapproval, or concern, they were more likely to adapt their stories. As well, if participants felt as though their environment was not positively sanctioned, largely professional environments or informal environments, they were also more likely to adapt their stories.

Generational divide. For my participants, perceptions of stigma were heavily dependent on what they saw as a generational divide between themselves and the people they were sharing their stories with, whether with family or others. When they perceive the person they are telling is of a generation that would either not understand the nature of meeting a partner online or not accept that way of meeting, participants were much more likely to either fabricate a different

story, modify the specifics of their story, or offer the story with some sort of justification or qualification.

Many participants who felt the need to fabricate or justify stories to older generations did so because they felt the medium would not be understood or the story would not be received with understanding. This is consistent with previous research that found people's negative perceptions of online dating stem from having a lack of familiarity with the internet (Anderson, 2005). As well, participants felt that members of older generations make assumptions about the safety and risks involved in meeting a partner online. This is consistent with prior research that concluded negative perceptions stem from the beliefs of online dating as inherently dangerous (Cali et al., 2013). This concern for safety is also consistent with research in evolutionary psychology that reveals parents tend to prefer characteristics in their children's mates that suggest high parental investment and cooperation with the in-group (Dubbs & Buunk, 2010). It seems likely that if families perceive partners found on sites like Craigslist as dangerous and partners found on apps like Tinder as promiscuous, that they will perceive those partners as less invested in parenting and cooperating with family culture or traditions, and ultimately, less acceptable as potential mates for their children.

When referencing "older generations", participants often referred to someone of another generation as someone in their parent's age range. When asked to deconstruct the term "older generation" in a few follow-up interviews, all participants equated "older generation" with anyone within their parents' age range. When participants perceived that the person they were telling was of a similar generation, and understood the nature or common practice of meeting a partner online, they were more likely to either share the full truth of their story or to share generally that they met online, while not necessarily revealing the specific platform. Clinicians

who work with individuals who met their partner online, or couples that met online, would benefit from exploring their clients' definitions of a "generational divide". Specifically, this means that a therapist would do well to attempt to deconstruct a "generation divide" as a social construct and help clients to reconstruct the language and meanings they ascribe to generational differences. Clinicians would do this in such a way that highlights aspects of alternative narratives that embrace meeting partners online and point to various aspects of online platforms that are more widely accepted as positive, and even beneficial. Further, MFT educators would do well to examine aspects of digital culture in diversity courses that contribute to cultural competency in MFT training programs.

Intersection of Identities

The findings of this study suggest that individual characteristics of people who met their partner online were important in the way they talked about and shared their story. Participants spoke about both their culture and their demographic characteristics as influencing the way they tell their story. When they described themselves as shy, in a different generation than their audience, as Black, female, straight, or living outside of an urban area, participants were less likely to share that they met their partner online. When participants described themselves as being open, of the same generation as their audience, White, male, gay or bisexual, or living in an urban area, they were more likely to share that they met their partner online.

These findings are consistent with research that suggests that shy people hesitate to engage in self-disclosure (Matsushima, Shiomi & Kuhlman, 2000), that older populations have more negative perceptions of online platforms than younger populations (Czaja et al., 2006; Volkom, Stapley & Amaturro, 2014), that intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender contribute to greater bias of already stigmatized identities (Kulesza et al., 2016), that online meetings are more

widely embraced in the LGBT community (Woo, 2015) and that online dating is more popular in urban and suburban areas (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Race and ethnicity. Some participants perceived their race or ethnicity as influencing the way they told their stories. One participant who gave a follow-up interview was particularly helpful in identifying deeper meaning; she elaborated on comments she made about race influencing the way she shared her story. She described the stress of managing micro-aggressions and already feeling judged for being a black woman as compounding her feelings about online dating. She described her race as something that makes her already feel over-exposed and that exposing another stigmatized identity, like dating online, would just add to the stress of managements others impressions and judgments.

Education and social class. Interesting, both education and social class were described with no clear influence on perceived stigma one way or the other. Educational level was sometimes perceived as something that would preclude someone from sharing their story, for example, perceiving that someone who is very well educated should not have to resort to online dating. However, another participant who described herself as well-educated (a doctoral student) spoke of the benefits of being able to find other well-educated people online. She said:

As a well-educated woman who is quite career driven I was drawn to somebody who embraced and wanted those qualities. When I tell the story of how we met and what attracted me to him in the first place is his strong feminist identity.

Social class or SES was also perceived as something that would make meeting online either acceptable or stigmatized. Some participants described their middle class status as either making them feel more comfortable or less comfortable sharing their story. The role of education level

and social class in perceiving stigma was not fully understood through the data. Participants who described these experiences did not provide contact information for follow-up questions.

Platform Hierarchy

Interestingly, participants' responses to questions about how online platforms influence the way they tell their story were very specific to a few platforms, namely Craigslist, Tinder, and Grindr. When speaking about these specific sites, many participants referred to perceptions of them as "shady" or only intended for "hooking up", aka for casual sex. For example, when asked about how the platform specifically influenced the story, one participant said, "I actually think that it's easier to tell people we met on Match because it has a better reputation whereas apps like Tinder are more seen as 'hook up' sites". This theme of specific platforms perceived as "hook up sites" or "hook up apps" is reflected in many responses in the data. Another participant said, "As Grindr is more of a hookup app I can be hesitate to name it at times and just say online. It has somewhat seedy connotations". While the specificity of these particular sites could be due to the wording in the examples given in survey questions, these specific sites were often brought up in other questions where participants were not specifically asked about platform. Thus, I concluded that participants were often more concerned with perceived stigma in the context of appearing to use a "hook up" platform than perceived stigma of meeting a partner online for a serious relationship. This is consistent with previous research findings that revealed negative perceptions and casual sex associations with Tinder (David & Cambre, 2016), Craigslist (Peters et al, 2013), and Grindr (Woo, 2015).

Participants often spoke about hook-up platforms as illegitimate, or questions how people perceived the legitimacy of their relationship if they met on a platform known for hook-ups. Participants tended to associate the legitimacy of a site with its subscription status; paid sites

were often seen as more traditional, serious, and legitimate ways to find seriously relationships, or relationships that wouldn't be negatively perceived. As well, social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram were perceived more positively because the meeting would have been unintentional, a spontaneous interaction, not searching. For example, one participant went so far as to say, "It would be fun to meet people from game or Instagram, it would definitely be easier and fun to tell the story because it doesn't start with the "dating" or "meeting people" concept". Another also said that, "I have only ever met someone online from Tinder or Bumble, but I would probably be more willing to say if I met someone from Instagram because that would be kind of cool".

Benefits of Meeting Online

When participants were asked to reflect on how meeting their partner online influenced their relationship satisfaction, many of them said that it did not, in and of itself. Given that 73 percent of participants (80 out of 110) felt that meeting a partner online was generally stigmatized, the fact that so many participants spoke about the benefits of meeting online indicates that the benefits can often outweigh the stigma (i.e. while people may feel that meeting a partner online is still perceived as stigmatized, they do not let that prevent them from dating online or discounting the benefits of online dating). Many participants spoke generally about the benefits of meeting a partner online, and described how they would never have otherwise met their partners offline or have been able to meet someone with such specifically preferred characteristics. Less participants also spoke generally about the drawbacks of meeting a partner online, which mainly centered around wishing they had a better or less boring story to tell about how they met their partner.

Reflexivity

In reflexively memoing and discussing the meanings of the findings, both the graduate student I worked with and I reflected on our own experiences with, and perceptions of, meeting partners online. As well, we reflected on any self-of-therapist issues that might arise when working with clients who met their partners online. For example, both my student and myself have previously met partners online, and have friends that met their partners online. When we discussed meeting partners online, we shared our perceptions of stigma. Like many of our participants, we identified both benefits of meeting a partner online and narratives that meeting online is common and accepted, and drawbacks to and stigmatized narratives of meeting online. Particularly, we agreed that factors like the specific platform, age, size, and values of audience, as well as geographic location all played a role in how stories of meeting partners online are perceived and shared.

Since both the graduate student I worked with and I have had experiences meeting partners online, our reflexive memoing and discussions of our findings were often interesting and illuminating. This led to interesting personal reflections, particularly about how our respective upbringings (differing geographic location, political and religious views) influenced our perceptions of stigma and when concealing the story of meeting online would be justified. We discussed systemic influences (including racism, ageism, and classism, among others) on participants' perception of stigma in meeting partners online. For example, even our eight-year age difference led to differences in perception of generational divides. She felt that anyone over 30 would have more difficulty accepting online meetings, whereas I am over 30 and disagree; I feel as though age is less important than familiarity and experience with online dating and a general sense of openness.

Her family, who lives in middle Georgia, and identifies as Christian, have a mixture of acceptance regarding online dating depending on the generation of the person in the family. With her parents, she would discuss where she met partners regardless of the dating site and corresponding stigma. However, with her grandmother she would simply say that she met a partner through mutual friends. She believes the majority of the discrepancy in her family originates from a safety concern about meeting strangers online stemming from misconceptions around online resources in general. My family, who live in and around New York City and identify as liberal Jewish, is generally accepting of meeting a partner online and perceive it as generally common and safe. However, just like the student I work with, I would hesitate to share that I met a partner online with my grandmother or anyone of a generation beyond my parents. Primarily, this is because I assume they would perceive online dating as something less legitimate as traditional dating and that they would perhaps judge my partner as less legitimate.

Narrative Therapy

Data could have been analyzed from various MFT models. I could have explored data through a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) framework and illustrated how schemas about online dating could be cognitively restructured. I could have explored data through an Emotionally-Focused Therapy (EFT) framework and argued that attachment needs are at core of a fear of being judged for online dating. I could have used a Contextual Family Therapy lens and highlighted the relational ethics involved in concealing a story or asking a partner to lie about how a relationship began. However, Narrative Therapy's emphasis on language and social constructionist principles was compatible with a symbolic interactionist framework and created a context for the exploration of both individual narratives and social discourses of online dating.

A narrative therapy framework was used to understand the clinician implications of working with clients who met partners online, and to make suggestions for clinicians working with these clients. Specially, applying this framework to participants' stories demonstrates how stigmatized stories of meeting online can be externalized and re-storied. In a narrative therapy approach, problems are not inherent in individuals or within families, nor do problematic cycles of interaction exist within families. People construe problem-saturated stories about their experiences that are not helpful; they are indoctrinated into narrow and self-defeating views of themselves and the world (White & Epston, 1990). For example, people who are not able to share the story of meeting their partner online may get indoctrinated into narrow views of themselves as the *type* of person that goes online (i.e. someone who is just looking to "hook up", a desperate, or risk person, etc.). As well, problem-saturated stories encourage people to respond to others in ways that perpetuate those stories. For example, when someone who feels stigma for meeting a partner online responds to that stigma by feeling shame and concealing their story, they perpetuate the perception that meeting online is stigmatized and should be concealed.

When using postmodern therapies like narrative therapy, therapists would notice how language generates meaning for clients when discussing meeting their partner online and should be curious about the meanings they ascribe to meeting their partner online. They would also do well to deconstruct societal beliefs about stigma and use language to re-author alternative meanings that give clients stories more authenticity and meaning. When clients *language* their story of meeting online in such a way that it diminishes their sense of self, therapists should *re-language* and re-relate their story with new meaning. Therapists can reflect on the themes in both the stigmatized and empowered narratives that participants in this study shared to re-language their own clients' narratives. To reconstruct and re-author stigmatized narratives, therapists can

specifically draw on the narrative comprised of themes that arose in this study: that meeting a partner online is a convenient, pragmatic, common, and appropriate way of meeting a partner that is accepted by many families.

Externalize. In narrative therapy, identity is important and viewed as socially constructed, not biologically determined (Combs & Freedman, 2016). A narrative therapy approach separates people's identities from their problems or mistakes. In order to make this separation, narrative therapists attempt to *externalize* people's problems through externalizing conversations. The goal is to help clients see their *relationship* to a problem, and not to let clients take on their problems as part of their identity. Narrative therapists externalize destructive cultural narratives, which helps to reduce feeling of guilt and blame (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

In the current study, some participants described social stigma as part of their identity (e.g. "... that I'm desperate"). Narrative therapists would do well to employ externalizing questions to separate people's identities from the stigma they feel from meeting a partner online. Specifically, when clients say, "I lied about meeting my partner online because I didn't want people to think I was desperate for going online or just looking for a one-night stand", a narrative therapist would ask them to externalize desperation and promiscuity and questions their relationship with those externalized objects.

Client strengths and positive attributes are also externalized and utilized to re-author more empowering narratives. A narrative therapist could ask questions to understand what parts of clients' personality or personhood allow them to overcome shame or stigma at certain times, in certain places, or with certain people. Perhaps honesty and openness work against shame and stigma in these alternative narratives. Re-storying these narratives with strengths and positive attributes allows clients to reconstruct preferred identities.

Unique outcomes. In White and Epston's (1990) re-authoring approach to narrative therapy, it is proposed that identifying and elaborating on "unique outcomes" is integral for constructing new narratives. It is assumed that all clients experience unique outcomes, which point to details of their lives that are outside problem-saturated stories. Freedman and Combs (1996) suggested that clinical reconstructions of new, alternative narratives should center around unique outcomes that the clients describe.

Narrative therapists highlight unique outcomes by using questions and connecting part of what Bruner (1996) called the *landscape of action* with the *landscape of consciousness* in their story. For example, a narrative therapist might ask a client who met their partner online how they were able to share the truth of their story in certain places or with certain people, and then connect that unique event with an element of their consciousness. Specifically, asking client to identify parts of themselves that unique outcomes highlight. Perhaps clients feel as though they can share the truth of their story when they feel safe and confident. Narrative therapists would ask clients what values were made visible by their confidence or honesty. Narrative therapists would then identify and connect other times when clients' values were made visible by those parts of their consciousness.

Narrative therapists also link unique outcomes to the present and future. For example, they would ask clients to think about how confronting other stigmatized identities in the past relates to how they confront stigma in their relationship or telling the story of meeting online. This is done to create a space wherein clients can see that they were able to confront stigma in the past, in other contexts, thus they may be able to confront stigma in the future, and begin to feel, think, and act differently. After narrative therapists search clients' narratives for unique outcomes, they help them to reconstruct alternative narratives that empower them to have more

agency. For example, rather than talk about how clients feel ashamed or lie about their story, narrative therapists inquire about times when *stigma* takes hold of them.

Not knowing. Firstly, narrative therapists would do well to be curious about clients' unique experiences of meeting partners online. While narrative therapists are considered experts in the therapeutic processes, the client is viewed as the expert of their lives and the therapist tries not to assume anything about the clients' lives or their problems when therapy begins. Not making assumptions in this approach is called *not knowing*. The therapist bases what they know about the client solely on what the client reports. Clients in this model are also encouraged to educate therapists about their culture and correct them when they make assumptions that do not fit (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

During the information gathering and initial assessment phase of treatment, narrative therapists should inquire about how clients met their partner. If clients met their partner online, therapists would do well to put aside their own personal assumptions about the experiences of people who met online and ask questions as if they do not know anything about the clients' experience of meeting their partner online. Narrative therapists should ask couple clients to make meaning of their stories together, and to share their preferred visions of their narratives. For example, this means asking couples who feel stigma for meeting online how they would have preferred to have met. Further, they would ask clients to question the assumptions in social discourses that influence those preferences, and ask clients what conclusions they drew about themselves based on those discourses. Narrative therapists further ask *relative influence questions* that explore the impact of meeting online on their presenting problem, or whatever issue brought the clients into therapy. For example, if a couple who met online comes to therapy

because an infidelity has occurred, a narrative therapist would explore if and how their meeting online influenced the infidelity.

Regarding stigma, assuming a not-knowing stance allows therapists to not only avoid previous perceptions and biases about online dating, it helps them to create a context for clients to explore alternative narratives. When therapy revolves around the clients' experiences, it creates more opportunities for the therapist to explore areas outside of what they assume. In particular, when discussing the story of meeting a partner online, a not-knowing stance creates more opportunities for clients to explore alternative narratives outside of their perceived stigmatized narratives.

Deconstruction and reconstruction. Narrative therapists can empower clients by deconstructing problem-saturated stories and asking clients to question assumptions within their stories. They would do well to ask *deconstructing questions* that reduce client's language to the basest emotion or thought that is meaningful to them about meeting their partner online. They also reduce *totalizing views*, or sets of behaviors that become the essence of an individual. For example, a narrative therapist would question client's totalizing views of themselves as "desperate" or "stigmatized". Narrative therapists further deconstruct *destructive cultural assumptions* with clients. They help clients make connections to cultural stories in direct and overt ways. Destructive cultural assumptions center on issues of power and agency; for example, "men are weak if they are emotional", or "people that meeting their partners online are desperate or promiscuous".

When narrative therapists collaborate with clients to re-author or reconstruct their dominant narratives, the process begins with exploring unique outcomes, then shifts from the past and present to the future and clients are asked to talk about what will be different when they

have completely defeated the “problem”. For example, a therapist can ask a client what will be different when they no longer perceive their online meeting as stigmatized or when they no longer feel the need to fabricate or modify the story of meeting their partner. After the story is re-authored, the client and therapist collaborate to reinforce the new story. Narrative therapists help clients explore who can reinforce the new story and encourage them to recruit people from the past who may be supportive. This means that clients who met their partners online may do well to discuss their perceptions with other who met online and embrace their story.

Reinforcement. In narrative therapy, new and more empowering stories are also reinforced with letters from the therapist. Narrative therapists often write letters to clients that summarize what happened in session, outline the new story that was developed, and express confidence in the client’s ability. When narrative therapists write letters to clients who met partners online, they can highlight positive attributes of their stories, i.e. they can highlight how their meeting was tailor-made through filters of preferred characteristics, novel in method, and smart in its convenience and pragmatism.

Suggestions for MFTs

Cultural competency. Developing an understanding of online relationships has been recommended for clinicians working with couples and families since the internet became widely used (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). It has also been recently suggested that the role of technology in couple relationships and in couples therapy should be explored (Piercy, et al., 2015). Most internet-related dyadic issues that clinicians have worked with centered on issues of infidelity, sexualized internet use, computer-mediated relational discord, online gaming, and online boundaries (Hawkins & Hertlein, 2013; Hertlein, 2012; Merkle & Richardson, 2000). Hoffman (2013) argued that it is increasingly important for therapists to examine the impact of

culture within a therapeutic context. In an increasingly digital world, *culture* has come to include the digital sphere, including online courtship practices and beliefs. According to Hoffman (2013), a culturally competent counseling approach should include three domains: awareness, knowledge, and skill. Therapists should be trained to recognize their own assumptions about meeting partners online and to better tailor assessment techniques and interventions that have more relevance to clients' lives. Cultural competency in MFT education would also be enhanced by including competencies in digital culture and exploring the influence of technology and digital culture on couple and family relationships.

Self-of-therapist. Recent research revealed that meaningful experiences for MFT graduate students often include self-of-therapist exercises and explorations (Piercy et al, 2016). Thus, MFT training programs would do well to guide students in addressing any personal biases and assumptions about online dating and digital culture that may impact their clinical work, either through projection or countertransference or by limiting the client's context for alternative narratives about their online meetings. MFT educators would also do well to consider exploring explore their own biases and assumptions about meeting partners online or online relationships generally. This includes reflecting on one's own experiences of meeting a partner online and personal associations with close others who have met partners online.

Therapists should be proactive in understanding and processing their own projections or countertransference and self-of-therapist issues related to clients who met partners online. For example, a therapist who perceives online dating as something that is stigmatized or less legitimate may not see opportunities for clients to deconstruct destructive narratives. Unprocessed biases also have the potential to steer therapy in a direction that undermines the process of deconstruction.

Implications

Therapists who utilize postmodern models of therapy that privilege language and discourse would do well to assist clients who met partners online to deconstruct destructive dominant narratives and reconstruct alternative narratives that are transformative and empowering. Alternative narratives empower clients to share their stories honestly, confronting both social stigma and their own self-stigma. Narrative therapists should be mindful of these dominant narratives, and remain attuned to the various mechanisms they can utilize to enrich and strengthen their clients' alternative stories.

In the current study, this means enriching alternative narratives that externalize the stigma associated with meeting a partner online. It also means searching for unique outcomes, or times when shame and stigma are not present in people's stories of meeting online. Based on the themes that emerged in the data, it is recommended that both clinicians and MFT educators consider the application of narrative therapy when working with clients who met their partners online. Therapists would do well to attend to self-of-therapist issues relating to meeting partners online, assume a not-knowing stance on this issue, deconstruct destructive narratives about stigma, externalizing stigma as the problem, and search for unique outcomes when stigma is not present in perceptions of meeting online. This is all done in an attempt to assist clients in re-authoring stories in their lives that give them more agency.

As clinicians and MFT educators consider ways to improve their clinical and cultural competencies, strengths-based narratives of people who have met their partners online can be valuable resources. In this study, I have explored the perceptions of people who have met their partner online to understand the role that stigma plays in perceptions of meeting online. In discovering themes in the stories that people tell who embrace their story and feel empowered to

share their online meetings, it is my hope that I have identified alternative narratives that clinicians and MFT educators can draw on to help struggling clients re-author their own destructive narratives. I believe these narratives can be a significant contribute to the field's focus on clinical competency, technology-assisted therapy, and the impact of technology on couples and family's lives.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Overall, despite the increasing rate at which individuals utilize online dating platforms, there is still a general perception that meeting a partner online is stigmatized. Overall, the participants in the current study perceived individuals of an older generation and those without any online dating experience as having more stigmatized attitudes about online dating. Participants were also much more likely to share that they met their partner online if they perceived their audience to be trustworthy, if the audience were comprised of close friends or individuals who also had online dating experiences, if the audience was relatively small and not situated in a professional setting, and if the audience did not consist of family members of an older generation. As well, intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation influenced how participants shared their online dating narratives. Specifically, participants in the LGBT community were generally more likely to share that they met their partner online and reported feeling less stigma for having done so. However, participants who identified as Black or African American generally reported that they were less likely to share their online meeting, citing the stigma of online dating as compounding an already stigmatized identity.

Participants also described a hierarchy of legitimacy amongst online dating platforms. Platforms reported that they were more likely to share that they met their partner online if they met on a “traditional” dating site. Traditional sites were described as those that were paid or required a subscription fee and were focused on bringing people together for marriage or relationships that are more serious. Sites or apps that were marketed for “hook ups”, or were perceived to be utilized for more casual dating, ranked lower on the legitimacy hierarchy and were less likely to be discussed and shared. Finally, while the majority of participants believed that a general stigma about meeting a partner online still exists, many spoke about the benefits of

meeting online. Thus, while stigmatized perceptions exist, for many participants, the benefits outweighed the perceived stigma and a significant amount of participants embraced how they met their partner even though they perceived a general stigma existing.

Using symbolic interactionist and narrative therapy frameworks, implications of the findings were explored. Suggestions for MFTs working with clients who met their partners online were made, specifically focusing on deconstructing destructive narratives about online dating as a stigmatized practice, and re-constructing or re-authoring new narratives about online dating that empower clients to be honest and authentic and externalize their own self-stigma. Lastly, competencies in online relationships for MFT education were suggested; specifically, MFT would do well to be versed in scholarship that explains the impact of technology on couple and families, and to engage in self-of-therapist exercises that account for biases and assumptions about online dating.

Limitations

In qualitative research, participants' perceptions will vary and it is important not read into any one participants' responses. As well, the goal of this study was to understand *perceived* stigma, thus I did not attempt to make any direct interpretations about causality. It was sometimes difficult to know whether participants were referencing perceptions associated with their current relationship only or were describing general perceptions of online dating and/or meeting partners online. While participants were asked to consider one relationship when responding to questions in the beginning of the survey, some questions asked participants to reflect more generally on the role of stigma in the way they perceive meeting a partner online. Thus, there may have been some inconsistency or overlap in participants responses.

Utilizing an online survey also presented some limitations for the study. In order to participate, participants must have a computer or mobile device and a connection to the Internet, resources that limit the sample to those with access, and perhaps those of a certain socioeconomic status. Thus, a certain level of privilege may influence the perceptions of people who have experience meeting online. As well, since there was such a quick response rate to the survey and it was only open for a few days, recruitment could have excluded people who would have otherwise participated without time constraints. The sample may have included people eager to share their opinions about online dating and excluded the experiences and perceptions of people who may have been a bit more hesitant to share or would have responded with more time.

The online survey may have also provided limited data in that participants may have been influenced by the examples I gave as suggestions. For example, after I asked participants about how the specific platform they met on influenced the way they perceived stigma or shared their story, I gave an example as a reference point, for example “(Craigslist vs OKCupid, Tinder vs Bumble, Sims vs World of Warcraft, Instagram vs Snapchat, etc.)”. These examples may have influenced the rate at which these platforms referenced or described in participants’ responses. However, no participants reported meeting on the Sims, Snapchat or Instagram, so suggestibility may have only influenced the comparisons participants made.

Future Research

The limits of this study provide opportunities for future research. Participants in the sample were predominantly female, white, straight, and cis gender. Future research should be purposeful about recruiting a more diverse sample of participants and accounting for the nuanced experiences of men, Black, Hispanic, Asian and other non-White racial groups, as well as the LGBT community (particularly transgender individuals, for whom there was no representation in

the current study). The current study also revealed that intersections of identity might make it more difficult to reveal that a relationship began online. Specifically, family studies and MFT scholars would do well to further understand how racial-ethnic, sexual, and gender identities all influence perceptions of stigma in meeting a partner online, and the sharing of online courtship stories. As well, there was no clear consensus in the current study about the role that education and socioeconomic status play in shaping perceptions of online dating and scholars should take note of these gaps and explore how educational level and socioeconomic status influence the way people perceive online dating as stigmatized.

Lastly, in their review of intergenerational relations and family therapy research, Fine and Norris (1989) suggested that assessing all family members' perceptions of their own family environment is important. Futures studies should explore the perceptions of online dating within families to measure and explore the role that family plays in shaping perceptions of stigma and the disclosure of online courtship stories. Specifically, future studies should include the perceptions of family to better understand and clarify assumptions about stigma made by online daters.

References

- Alterovitz, S., & Mendelsohn, G. (2009). Partner preferences across the life span: Online dating by older adults. *Psychology and Aging, 24*, 513-517. doi:10.1037/a0015897
- Alexa. (2017). *Top sites in the United States*. Retrieved from <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/US>
- Alto, K. M., McCullough, K. M., & Levant, R. F. (2016). Who is on craigslist? A novel approach to participant recruitment for masculinities scholarship. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*. Advanced online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/men0000092>
- Anderson, T. L. (2005). Relationships among Internet attitudes, internet use, romantic beliefs, and perceptions of online romantic relationships. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior, 8*, 521-531. doi:10.1089/cpb.2005.8.521
- Anderson, H., & Goolishian, H. A. (1988). Human systems as linguistic systems: Preliminary and evolving ideas about the implications for clinical theory. *Family Process, 27*(4), 371-393. doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.1988.00371.x
- Angelini, F. (2013, January 6). Finding love among the algorithms. *The Sunday Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/newsreview/features/article1188438.ece>
- Anonymous browsing hinders online dating signals. (2016). *Information Technology Newsweekly, 58*.
- Angwin, J. (1998). Love's labor lost: Online matchmaker still seeks love, money. *San Francisco Chronicle*. Retrieved from <http://www.sfgate.com/business/article/LOVE-S-LABOR-LOST-Online-matchmaker-still-seeks-3013097.php>
- Attrill, A., & Jalil, R. (2011). Revealing only the superficial me: Exploring categorical self

- disclosure online. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(5), 1634-1642.
doi:10.1016/j.chb.2011.02.001
- Balcom, D., Lee, R. G., & Tager, J. (1995). The systemic treatment of shame in couples. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 21(1), 55-65. doi:10.1111/j.1752-0606.1995.tb00138.x
- Baxter, H. (2013, November 28). Tinder is the dating app with many matches but no spark. *New Statesman*. Retrieved from <http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2013/11/many-matches-no-spark>
- Bellamy, A., & Greenfield, M. C. (2009). Examining African American and Caucasian interaction patterns within computer-mediated communication environments. *The Journal of Technology Studies*, 35(2), 2. doi:10.21061/jots.v35i2.a.1
- Best, K., & Delmege, S. (2012). The filtered encounter: Online dating and the problem of filtering through excessive information. *Social Semiotics*, 22(3), 237-258.
doi:10.1080/10350330.2011.648405
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall.
- Blackwell, D., & Lichter, D. (2000). Mate selection among married and cohabitating couples. *Journal of Family*, 21(3), pp. 275-302. doi:10.1177/019251300021003001
- Bos, H., & Gartrell, N. (2010). Adolescents of the USA national longitudinal lesbian family study: Can Family characteristics counteract the negative effects of stigmatization? *Family Process*, 49(4), 559-572. doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.2010.01340.x
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in*

- Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Buckwalter J. G., Carter S. R., Forgatch G. T., Parsons T. D., Warren N. C. (2004). Method and system for identifying people who are likely to have a successful relationship (U.S. Patent 6,735,568). Washington, DC: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office
- Buckwalter J. G., Carter S. R., Forgatch G. T., Parsons T. D., Warren N. C. (2008). Method and system for identifying people who are likely to have a successful relationship (U.S. Patent 7, 454,357B2). Washington, DC: U.S. Patent and Trademark
- Buehlman, K. T., Gottman, J. M., & Katz, L. F. (1992). How a couple views their past predicts their future: Predicting divorce from an oral history interview. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 5(3-4), 295-318. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.5.3-4.295
- Bumble. (2015, April 5). *About*. Retrieved from <https://bumble.com/en-us/about>
- Cacioppo, J. T., Cacioppo, S., Gonzaga, G. C., Ogburn, E. L., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2013). Marital satisfaction and break-ups differ across on-line and off-line meeting venues. *National Academy of Sciences*, 110(25), 10135-10140. doi:10.1073/pnas.1222447110
- Cali, B. E., Coleman, J. M., & Campbell, C. (2013). Stranger danger? Women's self-protection intent and the continuing stigma of online dating. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 16(12), 853-857. doi:10.1089/cyber.2012.0512.
- Castronova, E. (2006). *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Center for Disease Control. (2015). *Health, United States, 2015: With Special Feature on Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*. Retrieved from [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/15.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/15.pdf)

- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chen, T., Kaafar, M. & Boreli, R. (2013). The Where and When of Finding New Friends: Analysis of a Location-based Social Discovery Network. Presented at the Proceedings of the Seventh International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, Cambridge.
- Close, A., and Zinkhan, G. M. (2004). Romance and the Internet: The e-mergence of e-dating. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 31, 153-157
- Cocks, H. G. (2009). *Classified: The secret history of the personal column*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Combs, G., & Freedman, J. (2016). Narrative therapy's relational understanding of identity. *Family Process*, 55(2), 211-224. doi:10.1111/famp.12216
- Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: Charles Scribners' Sons.
- Couch, D. (2012). What are the real and perceived risks and dangers of online dating? Perspectives from online daters. *Health, Risk & Society*, 7, 697-714.
- Craigslist. (2011). White paper: Craigslist by the number. Retrieved from <http://3taps.com/papers/Craigslist-by-the-Numbers.pdf>
- Craigslist. (2017). *Personals*. Retrieved from <http://www.craigslist.org>
- Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. London: Sage.
- Crocker, J., Major, B., & Steele, C. (1998). Social stigma. In *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. S Fiske, D Gilbert, G Lindzey, vol. 2, pp. 504–53. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill
- Crocker, J. (1999). Social stigma and self-esteem: Situational construction of self-worth. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 35(1), 89.

- Curington, C. V., Lin, K. H., & Lundquist, J. H. (2015). Positioning multiraciality in cyberspace treatment of multiracial daters in an online dating website. *American Sociological Review*, 80(4), 764-788.
- Custer, L., Holmberg, D., Blair, K. L., & Orbuch, T. L. (2008). "So how did you two meet?" Narratives of relationship initiation, In S. Sprecher, A. Wenzel, & J. Harvey (Eds.), *Handbook of Relationship Beginnings* (pp. 453-470). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Czaja, S. J., Charness, N., Fisk, A. D., Hertzog, C., Nair, S. N., Rogers, W. A., & Sharit, J. (2006). Factors predicting the use of technology: Findings from the Center for Research and Education on Aging and Technology Enhancement (CREATE). *Psychology and Aging*, 21(2), 333-352. doi: 10.1037/0882- 7974.21.2.333
- Darwin, C. (1859). *The origin of species*. London, UK: Murray.
- David, G., & Cambre, C. (2016). Screened intimacies: Tinder and the swipe logic. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2). doi:10.1177/2056305116641976
- Davis, L. (2013, July 26). Five Reasons to Go Niche When Looking for Love Online. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laurie-davis/5-reasons-to-go-niche-when-looking-for-love-online_b_3526936.html
- Davies, D., & Dodd, J. (2002). Qualitative research and the question of rigor. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12, 279.
- Deutsch, M. (1958). Trust and suspicion. *Journal of Conflict Research*, 2, 265 – 279.
- Deutsch, M. (1960). Trust, trustworthiness, and the F Scale. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 61(1), 138 – 140.
- Donn, J. E., & Sherman, R. C. (2002). Attitudes and practices regarding the formation of romantic relationships on the Internet. *Cyber Psychology & Behavior* 5:107–123

- Dresner, E., & Herring, S. C. (2010). Functions of the nonverbal in CMC: Emoticons and Illocutionary force. *Communication Theory*, 20, 249–268.
- Dubbs, S. L., & Buunk, A. P. (2010). Parents just don't understand: Parent-offspring conflict over mate choice. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 8(4), 586-598.
doi:10.1177/147470491000800405
- eHarmony. (2017). *Member Index*. Retrieved from <http://www.eharmony.com/member-index/>
- Elizur, Y. (2001). Family support and acceptance, gay male identity formation, and psychological adjustment path model: A. *Family Process*, 40(2), 125.
- Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-Presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), 415-441. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00020.x
- Erikson, E.H. (1963). *Childhood and Society*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Facebook (2016). *Third Quarter 2016 Operational Highlights*. Retrieved from <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>
- Features. (2015, November 15). Retrieved from <http://www.yikyakapp.com/features/>
- Feng, J., Lazar, J., & Preece, J. (2004). Empathy and online interpersonal trust: A fragile relationship. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 23(2), 97-106.
doi:10.1080/01449290310001659240
- Fine, M., & Norris, J. E. (1989). Intergenerational relations and family therapy research: What we can learn from other disciplines. *Family Process*, 28(3), 301-315. doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.1989.00301.x

- Finkel, E. J., Eastwick, P. W., Karney, B. R., Reis, H. T., & Sprecher, S. (2012). Online dating: A critical analysis from the perspective of psychological science. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 13(1), 3-66. doi:10.1177/1529100612436522
- Foucault, M. (1965). *Madness and Civilization: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, R. Howard (Trans.). London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1973). *The Birth of the Clinic: an Archaeology of Medical Perception*, A.M. Sheridan (Trans.). London, UK: Tavistock.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*, A.M. Sheridan (Trans.). London, UK: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction*, Vol. I., R. Hurley (Trans.). London, UK: Penguin.
- Freedman, J., M.S.W., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Frost, D. M. (2011). Social stigma and its consequences for the socially stigmatized. *Social & Personality Psychology Compass*, 5(11), 824-839.
doi:10.1111/j.1751-9004.2011.00394.x
- Foa, U. G. & Foa, E. B. (1974). *Societal Structures of the Mind*. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas.
- Gilgun, J. F. (2005). Qualitative research and family psychology. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 19, 40-50.
- Gilgun, J. F. (2012). Enduring themes of qualitative family research. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 4, 80-95.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for*

Qualitative Research. Chicago, IL: Aldine Pub. Co.

Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Pearson Education, Inc.

Goffman, E. (1959). *Presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Goldenberg, T., Vansia, D., & Stephenson, R. (2016). Intragroup stigma among men who have sex with men: Data extraction from craigslist ads in 11 cities in the united states. *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*, 2(1), e4.

Gonzales, A., & Hancock, J. (2011). Mirror, mirror on my Facebook wall: Effects of exposure to Facebook on self-esteem. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 14:79, 83.

Goolishain, H. A., & Anderson, H. (1987). Collaborative Language systems and therapy: An evolving idea. *Psychotherapy*, 24, 529-538.

Gordon, R. (2017, January 27). EHarmony settles lawsuit over gay matchmaking. *San Francisco Chronicle* Retrieved from <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/EHarmony-settles-lawsuit-over-gay-matchmaking-3274826.php>

Greenberg, L. S., & Goldman, R. N. (2008). *Shame in couples therapy*. (pp. 315-349). DC; US; Washington; American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/11750-011

Grigoriadis, V. (2014, October 27). Inside the hookup factory. *Rolling Stone Magazine*.

Retrieved from <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/inside-tinders-hookup-factory-20141027>

Grindr. (2015). *Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from <http://www.grindr.com/press/>

- Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1985). *Effective evaluation: Improving the usefulness of evaluation through responses and naturalist approaches*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). "How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability". *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59-82.
- Guinness World Records (2004). *Largest online dating service*. Retrieved from <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/largest-online-dating-service>
- Hall, J., Park, N., Song, H., & Cody, M. (2010). Strategic misrepresentation in online dating: The effect of gender, self-monitoring, and personality traits. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27(1), 117-135.
- Harmon, A. (2003, June 29) Online Dating Sheds Its Stigma as Losers.com. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/29/us/online-dating-sheds-its-stigma-as-loserscom.html>
- Harris, K. M., & Aboujaoude, E. (2016). Online friendship, romance, and sex: Properties and associations of the online relationship initiation scale. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 19(8), 487-493. doi:10.1089/cyber.2016.0164
- Hawkins, B. P., & Hertlein, K. M. (2013). Treatment strategies for couple problems related to massively multiplayer online games. *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*, 12(2), 150-167.
- Heino, R., Ellison, N., & Gibbs, J. (2010). Relationshopping: Investigating the market metaphor in online dating. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27(4), 427-447.
- Hertlein, K. M. (2012). Digital dwelling: Technology in couple and family relationships. *Family Relations*, 61, 374-387. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2012.00702.x

- Hesper, E. J., & Whitty, M. T. (2010). Netiquette within married couples: Agreement about acceptable online behavior and surveillance between partners. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26, 916–926.
- Helsper, E. J., & Eynon, R. (2010). Digital natives: Where is the evidence? *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(3), 503-520. doi:10.1080/01411920902989227
- Hesper, E. J., & Whitty, M. T. (2010). Netiquette within married couples: Agreement about acceptable online behavior and surveillance between Partners. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26, 916–926. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2010.02.006
- Hitsch, G., Hortacsu, A., & Ariely, D. (2010). What makes you click? – Mate preferences in online dating. *Quantitative Marketing and Economics*, 8(4), 393-427.
- Hoffman, A. (2013). Bridging the divide: Using culture-infused counseling to enhance therapeutic work with digital youth. *Journal of Infant, Child & Adolescent Psychotherapy*, 12(2), 118-133. doi:10.1080/15289168.2013.791195
- Holmberg, D., & Orbuch, T.L. (2004). *Thrice-told tales: Married couples tell their stories*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association: Carroll, A., State Sponsored Homophobia 2016: A world survey of sexual orientation laws: criminalisation, protection and recognition (Geneva; ILGA, May 2016).
- Isaac, S. & Michael, W.B. (1995). *Handbook in research and evaluation*. San Diego, CA: Edits.
- Kiesler, S., Siegel, J., & McGuire, T. W. (1984). Social psychological aspects of computer-mediated communication. *American Psychologist*, 39(10), 1123-1134.
doi:10.1037//0003-066X.39.10.1123
- Kinsey, A. C., Pomeroy, W. B., & Martin, C. E. (1948). *Sexual behavior in the human male*.

Philadelphia, PA: W. B. Saunders Co.

Kinsey, A. C., & Institute for Sex Research. (1953). *Sexual behavior in the human female*.

Philadelphia, PA: Saunders.

Kolozsvari, O. (2015). Physically we are apart, but mentally we are not. Creating a shared space and a sense of belonging in long-distance relationships. *Qualitative Sociological Review*, 9(4), 102-115.

Korchmaros, J., Ybarra, M., & Mitchell, K. (2015). Adolescent online romantic relationship initiation: Differences by sexual and gender identification. *Journal of Adolescence*, 40, 54-64. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2015.01.00

Kreager, D., Cavanagh, S., Yen, J. & Yu, M. (2014). *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 76, 387-410. doi:10.1111/jomf.12072

Kulesza, M., Matsuda, M., Ramirez, J. J., Werntz, A. J., Teachman, B. A., & Lindgren, K. P. (2016). Towards greater understanding of addiction stigma: Intersectionality with race/ethnicity and gender. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 169, 85-91. doi:10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2016.10.020

LaRossa, R. (1993). Stories and Narratives. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. 12: 553. doi:10.1177/0265407595124009

LaRossa, R., & Reitzes, D.C. (1993) Symbolic interaction and family studies. In P.G. Boss, W.J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W.R. Schumm, & S.K. Steinmetz (Eds), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp 135-163). New York, NY: Plenum Press.

Lea, M., & Spears, R. (1992). Paralanguage and social perception in computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Organizational Computing*, 2, 321-341.

- Ledbetter, A., Mazer, J., & DeGroot, J. (2011). Attitudes toward online social connection and self-disclosure as predictors of Facebook communication and relational closeness. *Communication Research, 38*: 27–53.
- Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *SAGE Handbook of qualitative research*, (pp. 97-128). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE
- Lo, S., Hsieh, A., & Chiu, Y. (2013). Contradictory deceptive behavior in online dating. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(4), 1755-1762. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.010
- Lun, J., Mesquita, B., & Smith, B. (2011). Self- and other-presentational styles in the southern and northern united states: An analysis of personal ads: Culture and self-presentational styles. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 41*(4), 435-445. doi:10.1002/ejsp.804
- MacArthur Foundation. (2009). *Research Predicts Longer Life Expectancy for Americans, Higher Outlays for Medicare and Social Security*. Retrieved from <https://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/research-predicts-longer-life-expectancy-for-americans-higher-outlays-for-medicare-and-social-security/>
- Major, B., & O'Brien, L. T. (2005). The social psychology of stigma. *Annual Review of Psychology, 56*(1), 393-421. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070137
- Margolis, E. (2014). G2: Women: The new rules of lesbian dating: Could an app improve the experience of online dating for women? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2014/mar/24/online-dating-lesbians-app-dattch-women>
- Masters, W. H., & Johnson, V. E. (1966). *Human sexual response*. Toronto; New York: Bantam Books.

- Masters, W. H., & Johnson, V. E. (1979). *Homosexuality in perspective*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, p. 11
- Mathes, E. W., & Moore, C. L. (1985). "Reik's complementarily theory of romantic love". *Journal of Social Psychology*, 125 (3), pp. 321-327.
[doi:10.1080/00224545.1985.9922893](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1985.9922893).
- Matos, M., Santos, A., Gonçalves, M., & Martins, C. (2009). Innovative moments and change in narrative therapy. *Psychotherapy Research*, 19(1), 68-80.
[doi:10.1080/10503300802430657](https://doi.org/10.1080/10503300802430657)
- Matsushima, R., Shiomi, K., & Kuhlman, D. M. (2000). Shyness in self-disclosure mediated by social skill. *Psychological Reports*, 86, 333. [doi:10.2466/PRO.86.1.333-338](https://doi.org/10.2466/PRO.86.1.333-338)
- May, J. C. (2005). Family attachment narrative therapy: Healing the experience of early childhood maltreatment. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 31, 221-237.
[doi:10.1111/j.1752-0606.2005.tb01565.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2005.tb01565.x)
- McKenna, K.Y. (2007). A progressive affair: online dating to real world mating. In M. T. Whitty, A. J. Baker, & J. A. Inman (Eds.), *Online matchmaking* (pp. 112– 124). Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McWilliams, S., & Barrett, A. (2012). Online dating in middle and later life gendered Expectations and experiences. *Journal of Family Issues*, 35, 411-436.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Menkin, J., Robles, T., Wiley, J., & Gonzaga, G. (2015). Online dating across the life span: users' relationship goals. *Psychology and Aging*, 30(4), 987–993.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0039722>
- Merkle, E. R., & Richardson, R. A. (2000). Digital dating and virtual relating: Conceptualizing

- computer mediated romantic relationships. *Family Relations*, 49(2), 187-192.
doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2000.00187.x
- Moss, Rachel. (2016). 'HER' founder Robyn Exton on why she created a lesbian dating app focused on community. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from
http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/robyn-exton-lesbian-dating-app-her-interview_uk_572ca692e4b0e6da49a62a59
- Murstein, B. I. (1980). Mate selection in the 1970s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 42(4), 777-792.
- Oksman, V., & Turtiainen, J. (2004). Mobile communication as a social stage: Meanings of mobile communication in everyday life among teenagers in Finland. *New Media & Society*, 6(3), 319-339. doi:10.1177/1461444804042518
- Ong, D., & Wang, J. (2015). Income attraction: An online dating field experiment. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 111, 13-22. doi:10.1016/j.jebo.2014.12.011
- Papp, L. M., Danielewicz, J., & Cayemberg, C. (2012). 'Are we Facebook official?' Implications of dating partners' Facebook use and profiles for intimate relationship *satisfaction*. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior & Social Networking*, 15(2), 85-90.
doi:10.1089/cyber.2011.0291
- Parks-Ramag, J. (2016, December 28). Inside Grindr's Quest to Become the First Global Gay Lifestyle Brand. *Broadly*. Retrieved from https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/inside-grindr-quest-to-become-the-first-global-gay-lifestyle-brand
- Phegley, J. (2011). *Courtship and marriage in Victorian England*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Piercy, F., Riger, D., Voskanova, C., Chang, W., Haugen, E., & Sturdivant, L. (2015). What marriage and family therapists tell us about improving couple relationships through

- technology. In C. Bruess (Ed.), *Family communication in an age of digital and social media*. NY: Peter Lang.
- Piercy, F. P., Earl, R. M., Aldrich, R. K., Nguyen, H. N., Steelman, S. M., Haugen, E., . . . Gary, E. (2016). Most and least meaningful learning experiences in marriage and family therapy education. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 42, 584-598.
doi:10.1111/jmft.12176
- Peters, C. O., Thomas, J. B., & Morris, R. (2013). Looking for love on craigslist: An examination of gender differences in self-marketing online. *Journal of Marketing Development and Competitiveness*, 7, 79-95.
- Pew Research Center. (2013). *Online Dating and Relationships*. Retrieved on March 8, 2017 from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/10/21/online-dating-relationships/>
- Pew Research Center. (2015). *Attitudes towards online dating grow more positive*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank>
- Phillips, N. and Hardy, C. 2002. *Discourse Analysis: Investigating Processes of Social Construction*, Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage Inc.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-6.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816>
- Ramirez, A., Sumner, E., Fleuriet, C., & Cole, M. (2015). When online dating partners meet offline: The effect of modality switching on relational communication between online daters. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 20, 99-114.
- Regan, P. (2008). *The mating game: a primer on love, sex, and marriage*. London: Sage Publications.
- Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., & Elam, G. (2003). Designing and selecting samples. In Jane Ritchie &

- Jane Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice. A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp.77-108) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rosenbaum, M. S., Daunt, K. L., & Jiang, A. (2013). Craigslist exposed: The internet-mediated hookup. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 60(4), 505-531. doi:10.1080/00918369.2013.76030
- Rosenfeld, M. J., & Thomas, R. J. (2012). Searching for a Mate: The rise of the Internet as a social intermediary. *American Sociological Review*, 77, 523-547.
doi:10.1177/0003122412448050
- Rostow, A. (2005, August 16). The hottest spot online. *The Advocate*, 944, 68. Retrieved from <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/17741310/hottest-spot-online>
- Roulston, K. (2001). Data analysis and 'theorizing as ideology'. *Qualitative Research*, 1(3), 279-302.
- Roy, K., Zvonkovic, A., Goldberg, A., Sharp, E., & LaRossa, R. (2015). Sampling richness and qualitative integrity: Challenges for research with families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77, 243-260.
- Ruiz Vicente, C., Freni, D., Bettini, C., & Jensen, C. S. (2011). Location-related privacy in geo-social networks. *IEEE Internet Computing*, 15(3), 20-27. doi:10.1109/MIC.2011.29
- Saldana, J. (2009). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Sandelowski, M. (1986). The problem of rigor in qualitative research. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 8, 27
- Sant, P., & Catania, G. (2014). The growing web of influence of social networking sites on interpersonal relationships. *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, 7(5), 719-734.

- Sassler, S. (2010). Partnering across the life course: Sex, relationships, and mate selection. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 557-575.
- Scheff, T. J. (2003). Shame in self and society. *Symbolic Interaction*, 26(2), 239-262.
doi:10.1525/si.2003.26.2.239
- Schwartz, R. C. (1999). Narrative therapy expands and contracts family therapy's horizons. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 25(2), 263-267. doi:10.1111/j.1752-0606.1999.tb01127.x
- Sheldon, K. M., Abad, N., & Hinsch, C. (2011). A two-process view of Facebook use and relatedness need-satisfaction: Disconnection drives use, and connection rewards it. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(4), 766-775. doi:10.1037/a0022407
- Siegel, J., Dubrovsky, V., Kiesler, S., & McGuire, T. W. (1986). Group processes in computer-mediated communication. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 37(2), 157-187. doi:10.1016/0749-5978(86)90050-6
- Skopek, J., Schmitz, A., & Blossfeld, H. (2011). The gendered dynamics of age preferences -- Empirical evidence from online dating. *Zeitschrift Für Familienforschung - Journal Of Family Research*, 23(3), 267-290.
- Smith, C., & Nylund, D. (Eds.). (1997). *Narrative therapies with children and adolescents*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Smith, J.A. & Osborn, M. (2003) Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J.A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. London: Sage.
- Sritharan, R., Heilpern, K., Wilbur, C., & Gawronski, B. (2010). I think I like you: Spontaneous and deliberate evaluations of potential romantic partners in an online dating context. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40, 1062-1077. Doi:10.1002/ejsp.703.

- Strassberg, D. S., & English, B. L. (2015). An experimental study of Men's and Women's personal ads. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 44(8), 2249-2255. doi:10.1007/s10508-014-0428-6
- Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321-326. Doi: 10.1089/1094931041291295
- Surra, C. (1990). Research and Theory on Mate Selection and Premarital Relationships in the 1980s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 52(4), 844-865. doi: 10.2307/353306
- THE LOVE THAT DARED SPEAK ITS NAME. (2009). *The Times* (United Kingdom), 36,37,38,39.
- Thompson, D., & Filik, R. (2016). Sarcasm in written communication: emoticons are efficient markers of intention. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 21: 105–120. Doi: 10.1111/jcc4.12156
- Turoff, M. (1982). Interface design in computerized conferencing systems. In NYU Symposium on User Interfaces. New York: New York University, Graduate School of Business Administration, Computer Applications and Information Systems
- United States Census Bureau (1999). *Interracial Married Couples: 1960 to Present*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/ms-la/tabms-3.txt>.
- United States Census Bureau. (2010). *American Community Survey*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/marriage/data/acs/ElliottetalPAA2012figs.pdf>
- United States Census Bureau. (2012). *Unmarried and Single American Women*. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/cb12-ff18.html

- United States Census Bureau. (2016). *Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1947 to 2016*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html>
- Utz, S. (2015). The function of self-disclosure on social network sites: Not only intimate, but also positive and entertaining self-disclosures increase the feeling of connection, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 45, 1-10. dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.076.
- Valkyrie, Z. C. (2011). Cybersexuality in MMORPGS: Virtual sexual revolution untapped. *Men and Masculinities*, 14(1), p 76-96.
- Vogel, E., Rose, J., Roberts, L., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3(4), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000047>
- Volkom, M. V., Stapley, J. C., & Amaturro, V. (2014). Revisiting the digital divide: Generational differences in technology use in everyday life. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 16(3), 557.
- Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research*, 23(1), 3-44.
- Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research*, 23(1), 3-43.
doi:10.1177/009365096023001001
- Walther, J. B., & Parks, M. R. (2002). Cues filtered out, cues filtered in: computer-mediated communication and relationships. In M. L. Knapp, & J. A. Daly (Eds.), *Handbook of Interpersonal communication* (3rd ed.). (pp. 529e563). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Wamboldt, F. S. (1999). Co-constructing a marriage: Analyses of young couples' relationship

- narratives. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 64(2), 37-51.
- Wang, Q., Myers, M. D., & Sundaram, D. (2013). Digital natives and digital immigrants: Towards a model of digital fluency. *Business & Information Systems Engineering*, 5(6), 409-419. doi:10.1007/s12599-013-0296-y
- Weiss, H. (2015). Introduction: The role of shame in psychoanalytic theory and practice. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 96(6), 1585-1588. doi:10.1111/1745-8315.12418
- Wells, G. (2015, March 16). eHarmony founder talks matchmaking in the age of tinder. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2015/03/16/eharmony-founder-talks-marriage-matchmaking-in-the-age-of-tinder/>
- White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York: Norton.
- White, M. (2004). *Narrative practices and exotic lives: Resurrecting diversity in everyday life*. Adelaide, South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Whitty, M., & Gavin, J. (2001). Age/sex/location: Uncovering the social cues in the development of online relationships. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, 4(5), 623-630
- Whitty, M. (2008). Revealing the 'real' me, searching for the 'actual' you: Presentations of self on an internet dating site. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(4), 1707-1723. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2007.07.002
- Whitty, M., & Buchanan, T. (2016). The online dating romance scam: The psychological impact on victims - both financial and non-financial. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 16(2), 176-194. doi:10.1177/1748895815603773

- Whitty, M., & Carr, A. (2006). *Cyberspace romance: The psychology of online relationships*. Palgrave Macmillan. doi: 10.5964/ijpr.v1i2.15
- Wiederhold, B. (2015). Twenty years of online dating: Current psychology and future prospects. *Cyberpsychology Behavior and Social Networking*, 18(12), 695-696. doi:10.1089/cyber.2015.29017.bkw
- Wildermuth, S. M., & Vogl-Bauer, S. (2007). We met on the net: Exploring the perceptions of online romantic relationship participants. *Southern Communication Journal*, 72(3), 211-227. doi:10.1080/10417940701484167
- Winslade, J., & Monk, G. (1999). *Narrative counselling in schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Woo, J. (2015). Grindr: Part of a complete breakfast. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 2(1), 61-72. doi:10.14321/qed.2.1.0061
- Wong, W. (2010, July 22). Online dating grows, sheds stigma. *Tribune News*. Retrieved from http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-07-22/business/sc-biz-0723-online-dating--20100722_1_dating-online-meeting
- World Health Organization (2016). *Global Health Observatory Data Report*. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/gho/mortality_burden_disease/life_tables/situation_trends_text/en/
- Yashari, L. (2015, August 7) Meet the Tinder Co-Founder Trying to Change Online Dating Forever. *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved from <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/bumble-app-whitney-wolfe>

Appendix A

Screening Questions

Are you currently 18 years of age or older?

Are you currently, or have you been within the past 5 years, in a romantic relationship with someone you met online?

Informed Consent Information

Your responses will be completely anonymous and confidential. You have the freedom to stop the survey or withdraw from the study at any time without being penalized in any way. I anticipate no risk to you from taking part in this study. On the other hand, you may benefit from participating by re-exploring feelings and experiences you have had relating to this study's subject. You may also benefit from the study's findings by learning more about what others experience.

At the end of the survey, you will have the option to enter a drawing for one of three \$50 Amazon gift cards (with a 1 in 20 odds). You may also provide an email address if you would like a copy of the study's results and/or if you would allow the researcher to contact you for follow-up questions. Should you choose to provide your email address, it will remain confidential and will never be linked to your responses in the study's report.

This research project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (IRB# 17148). The completion of the online survey is evidence of your voluntary willingness to participate. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at conferences. Should you have any questions or concerns about this research study and/or its conduct, please contact:

Dana Riger
516-984-3894
driger@vt.edu

If you have any questions or concerns about research participants' rights, please contact:

David M. Moore, Chair, IRB
540-231-4991
moored@vt.edu

Demographic Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate!

To start, please complete the below demographic portion as best you can.

Age
Sex and/or gender
Sexual orientation
Race and/or ethnicity

Religion and/or spirituality
 Highest level of education completed
 Income level (range)
 Current relationship status
 Current location (city and state)

Narrative Questions

Please reflect on a romantic relationship you have had with someone you met online. This may be your current relationship or a previous relationship (one that you have had within the past 5 years). In the context of this survey, online may include traditional dating sites/apps and online personal ads, as well online games or social media. Please keep this relationship in mind as you respond to the survey questions, and respond in as much detail as you feel comfortable with.

Please share the story of how you met your partner.

In general, do you feel that meeting a partner online is at all socially stigmatized?

How does social stigma about meeting someone online influence the way you feel about yourself, how you met your partner, and the way you tell the story of how you met?

Please describe why you believe meeting a partner online is not socially stigmatized.

How do your own individual characteristics influence the way you tell the story of meeting your partner online? (age, gender/sex, race/ethnicity, education, income level, location, religion)

How does your environment influence the way you tell the story of meeting your partner online? (where you are, occasion for gathering, number of people, etc.)

How does the specific platform where you met your partner influence the way you tell the story of meeting them? (Craigslist vs OKCupid, Tinder vs Bumble, Sims vs World of Warcraft, Instagram vs Snapchat, etc.)

How do your family's feelings about meeting someone online influence the way you feel about meeting your partner and the way you tell the story of meeting them?

Have you discussed and/or negotiated the "story of how we met" with your partner?
 Please describe what that discussion was like.

Why do you think you have not discussed it?

Has meeting your partner online influenced your relationship satisfaction? Why or why not?

If there is anything else you wish to share on this subject, please do so here.

Conclusion

Thank you for your responses!

If you wish to be contacted for any of the following reasons, please provide your email address in the text boxes below.

If you choose not to provide an email address, you may skip this portion of the survey and submit your responses.

Please provide your email address if you would like to be entered in a drawing to win one of three \$50 Amazon gift cards.

Please provide your email address if you would like to be sent a copy of this study's results.

Please provide your email address if you are willing to be contacted at a later date for followup

Appendix B

Initial Code Table (97)

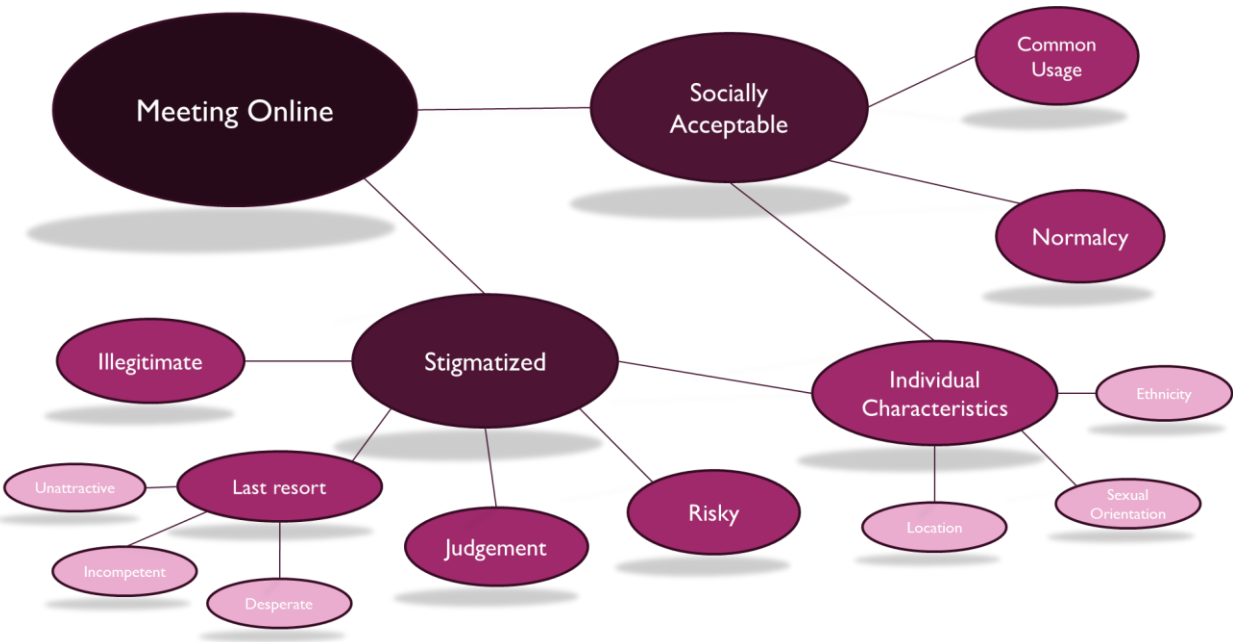
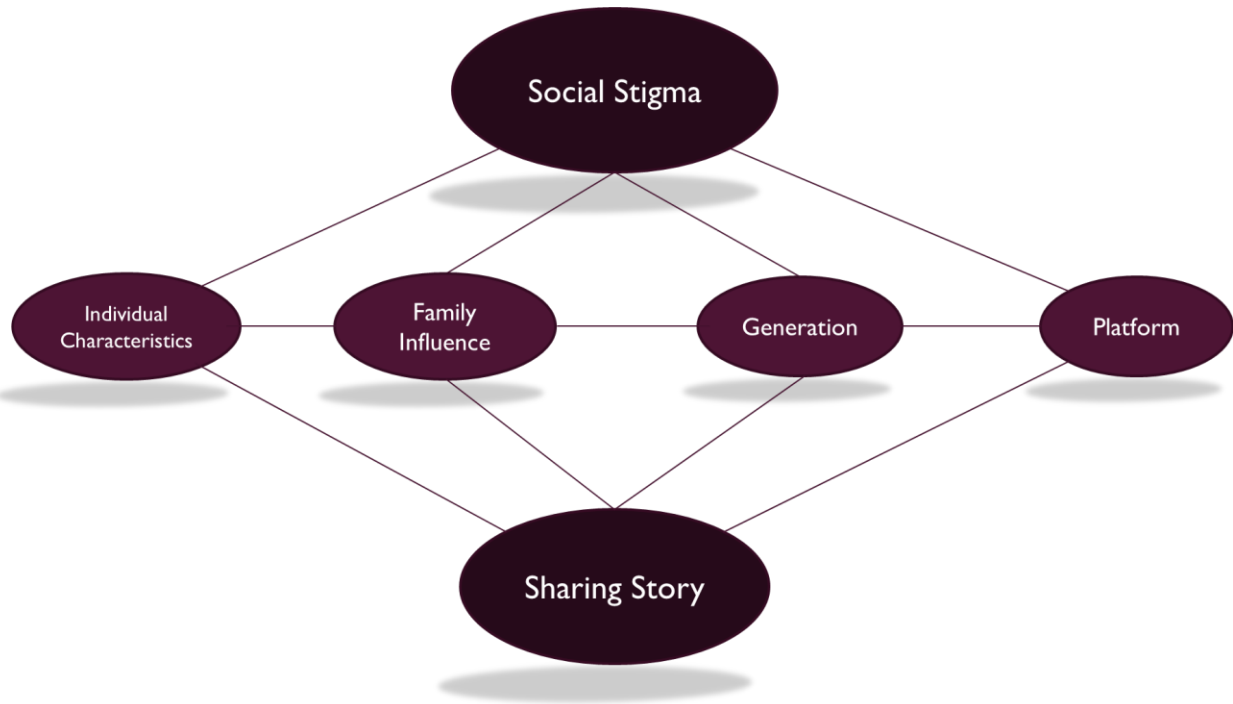
Platform	70	Cultural relativity	12
Benefits of meeting online	67	Sexual Orientation	11
Generational divide	44	Conservative	11
More acceptance of meeting online	38	Secrecy or withholding information	10
Family acceptance	37	Modifying story	10
Tinder	33	Last resort	10
Trusted confidants	30	Online Gaming	9
Social Stigma	30	Family influence	9
Negotiating the story	30	Environment	9
Embarrassment	28	Awkwardness	9
Fabricating stories	26	Urban area	8
Discussing story	24	Shame	7
Common experience meeting someone online	24	Mutual friends	7
Hook up site	23	Gender	7
Vagueness	21	Racial characteristics	6
Safety	20	Family not influential	6
Craigslist	20	Confirming identity	6
Honesty and Truth	19	Professional environment	5
Family disapproval	19	Online vs Offline	5
Informal initial meeting	18	Negative emotions	5
OKCupid	16	Hesitation telling family	5
Judgement	16	Family concern	5
Humor	16	Caution	5
Legitimacy of online relationships	15	Wanting better story	4
Family not understanding	15	Self-stigma	4
Security or long time in relationship	14	Qualifying or justifying statements about story	4
Convenience	14	Fear of Judgement	4
Religious influence	13	Facebook	4
Number of people in environment	13	Desperation	4
Individual characteristics	13	Spontaneous vs intention online meeting	3
Embracing story of meeting	13	Shyness	3
Deception	13	Relationship satisfaction	3
Drawbacks to meeting online	12	Paid Websites	3

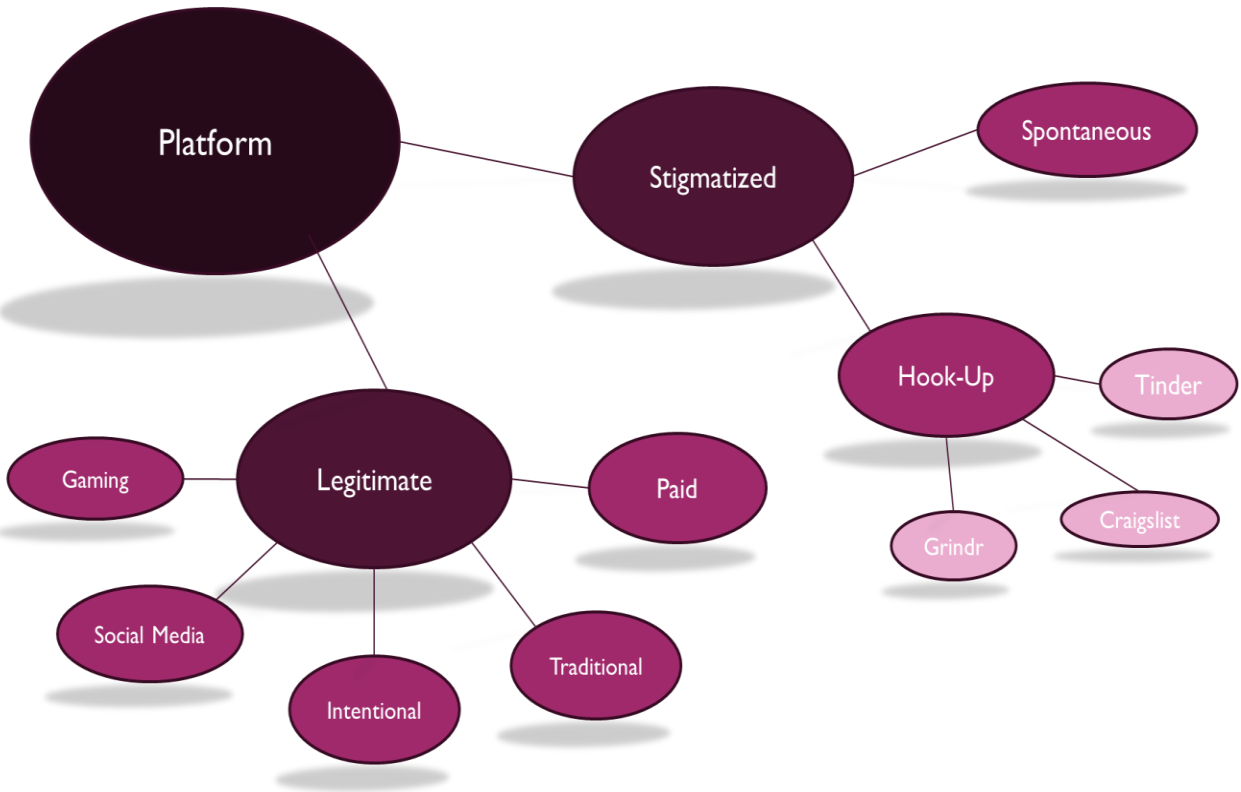
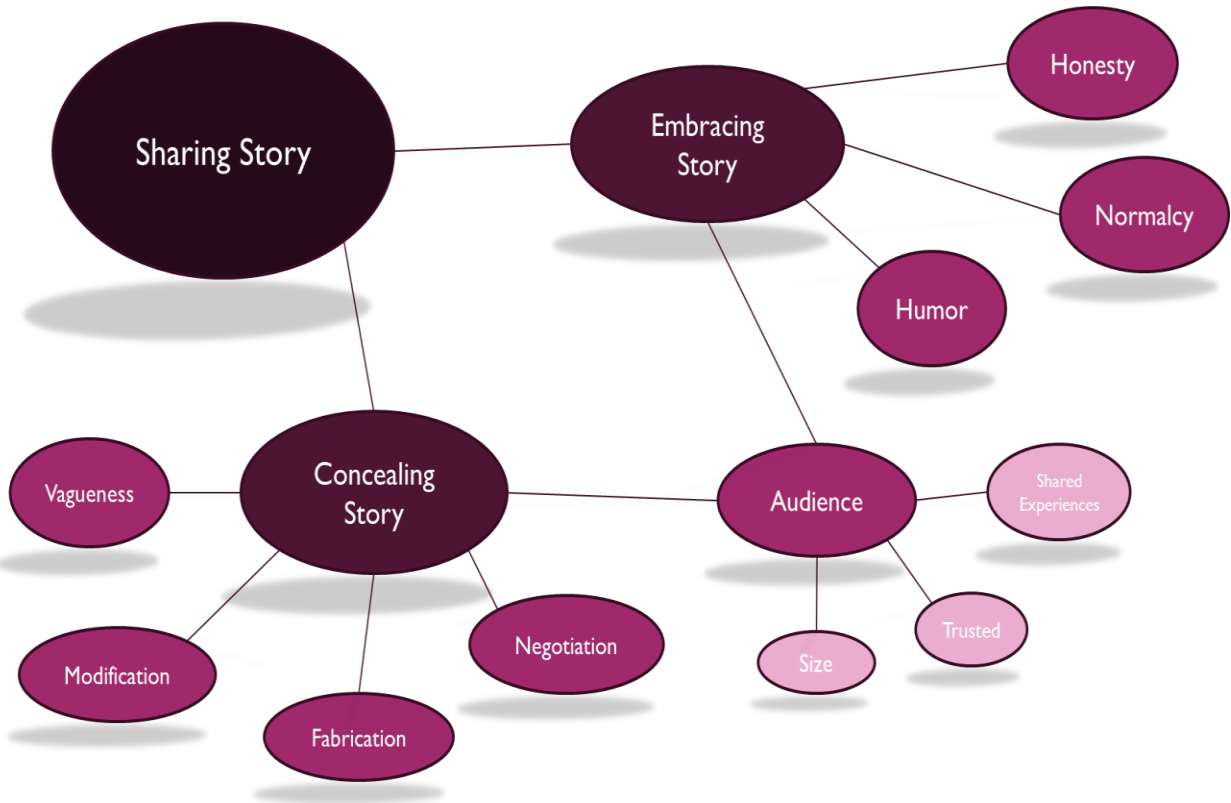
Location	3	Pragmatism	1
Intersectionality	3	Openness	1
Experience with dating apps	3	Maturity	1
Boring story	3	Liberal	1
Attractiveness	3	Lack of time for traditional dating	1
Social contexts	2	Improper	1
Rural area	2	Importance of story	1
Respectability	2	getting to know each other online	1
Relationship initiation narratives	2	Family values	1
Education	2	Fake story	1
Character associations	2	eHarmony	1
Being selective online	2	Competence at dating	1
Uncomfortable sharing	1	Common interests	1
Shattering stigma	1	Children	1
Reluctance	1	Bumble	1
Relationship duration	1		

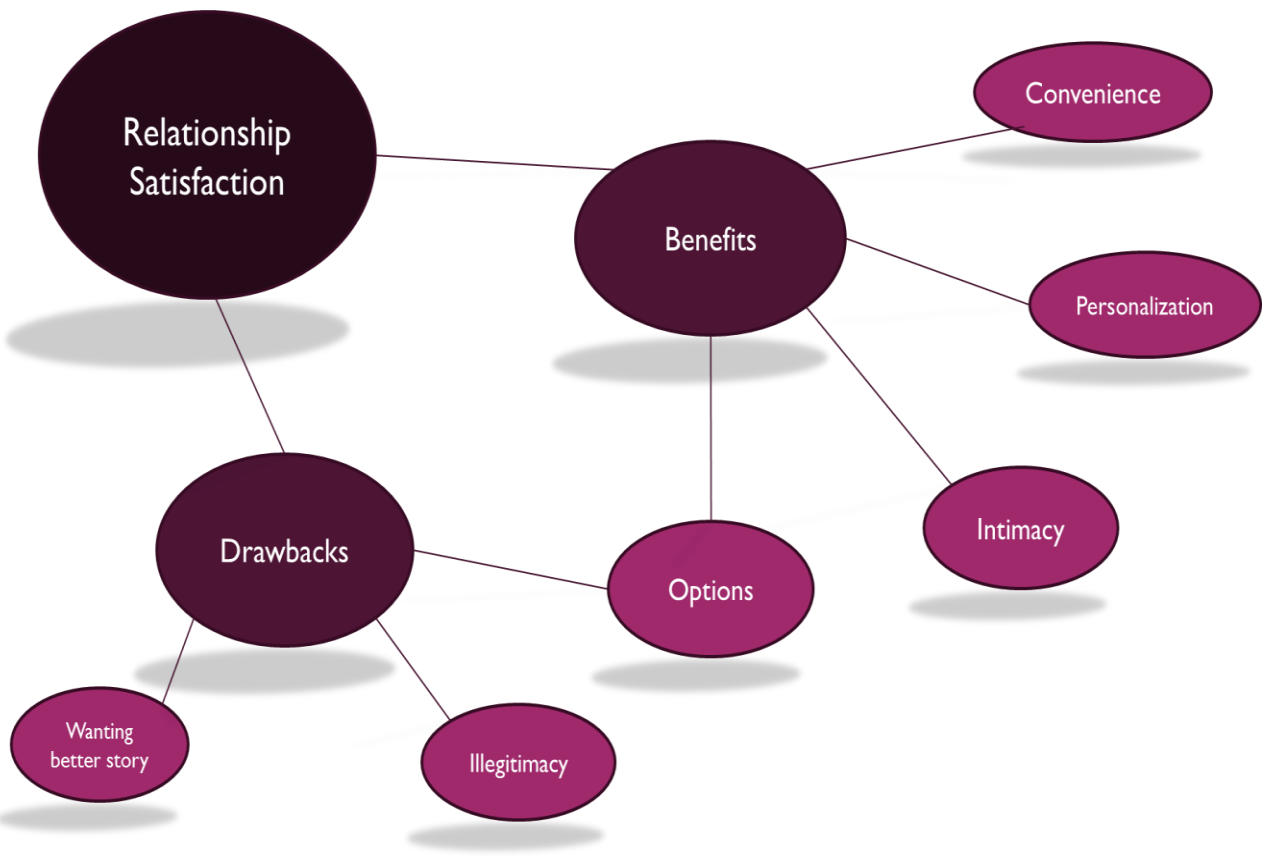
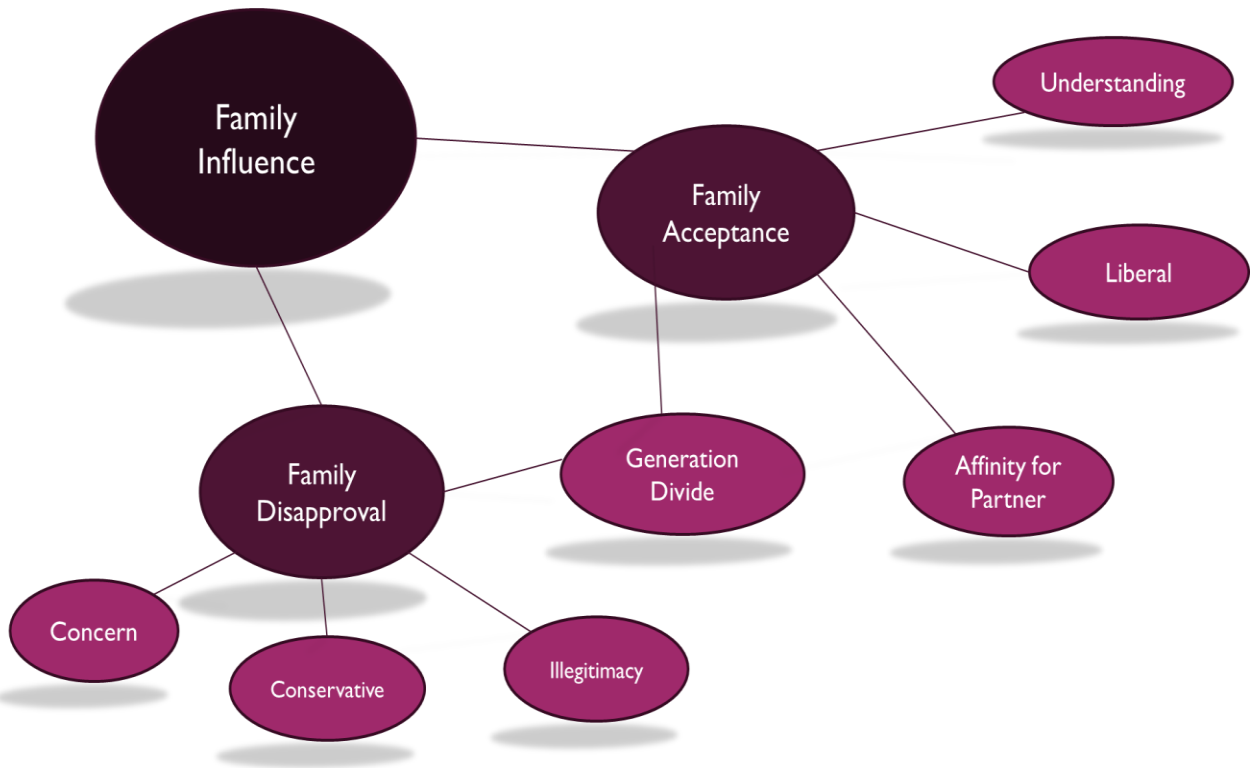
Initial Category Table (41)

Platform	70	Security or long time in relationship	15
Benefits of meeting online	67	Convenience	14
Generational divide	44	Embracing story of meeting	13
More acceptance of meeting online	38	Individual characteristics	13
Family acceptance	37	Cultural relativity	12
Negotiating the story	30	Drawbacks to meeting online	12
Trusted confidants	30	Conservative	11
Embarrassment	29	Secrecy or withholding information	11
Social Stigma	29	Last resort	10
Fabricating stories	26	Awkwardness	9
Common experience meeting someone online	24	Environment	9
Discussing story	24	Family influence	9
Vagueness	21	Family concern	5
Safety	20	Negative emotions	5
Family disapproval	19	Online vs Offline	5
Honesty and Truth	19	Wanting better story	5
Informal initial meeting	18	Desperation	4
Humor	16	Location	3
Judgement	16	Relationship satisfaction	3
Family not understanding	15	Competence at dating	2
Legitimacy of online relationships	15		

Appendix C







Appendix D

Table of self-reported religious and spiritual identities of participants

Christian (18)	Asatru (1)	Presbyterian USA (1)
Atheist (14)	Druid (nature spirituality) (1)	Quaker (1)
None (14)	I believe in goodness (1)	Raised Catholic (1)
Catholic (13)	Islam (1)	Raised Catholic, left ASAP (1)
Agnostic (11)	Lutheran (1)	Roman Catholic (1)
Jewish (4)	Monotheism (1)	Undefined (1)
N/A (3)	Nature (1)	Undefined spiritual (1)
Protestant (2)	Non Practicing Catholic (1)	Unitarian Universalist Pagan (1)
I believe in God (2)	Not religious (1)	United Methodist (1)
Spiritual (2)	Optimistic agnostic (1)	Zen/Spiritual (1)
Baptist (2)	Pagan/Other (1)	

Appendix E

Memo – March 24, 2017 – 3:45pm

As I am reading the initial responses of participants as they are coming in, I am noticing that I am much more biased and assumptive than I thought I would be going into the data collection process. I am surprised by how much more interested and intrigued I am by the responses that confirm some of my biases and assumptions. Namely, I notice that when a response from a participant describes feelings of stigmatization about meeting a partner online, I am more curious about the underlying meanings and language that participant uses. I notice that when a participant describes feeling as if there was no perceptions of stigma over their online meetings, I am questioning the validity and the truth of that participant's statement more than I am of others. As I notice these feelings arise in me, I want to be sure to examine my confirmation bias. I am re-reading the responses that do not confirm my biases and digging for deeper meaning where I was otherwise not too curious. I am accounting for my own experiences and perceptions and trying to assume the same "not knowing" stance that a narrative therapist would with a client who met their partner online.

I found that when I started to really use dig deeper into the data that did not confirm my biases, there was a lot of rich information that I found valuable. The stories and perceptions of participants who did *not* feel that online dating was stigmatized helped me to see what kind of alternative narratives and empowered stories I could suggest to clients who do feel ashamed or stigmatized for having met their partner online.

Memo – April 1st, 2017 – 1:05am

As I am whittling down the list of codes and making decisions about categories and which codes to subsume into others and which to discard, I'm noticing that there's an interesting theme about how the audience participants are sharing with is pretty dependent on the level of trust and comfort people feel. I was assuming that people's perceptions of stigma or the likelihood of their sharing would be much more based on their own opinions, values, sense of honesty and transparency. However, even participants who described feeling like they were generally contented with how they met their partner and did not feel stigmatized for having met their partner online, were still censoring themselves if they were with a group of people they didn't feel like they could "trust".

I was surprised that trust was a word that a lot of participants used; I assumed that the likelihood of sharing the story of meeting online would have more to do with the age and familiarity with online dating of the participants and the people they told their story to. This sense that an audience had to be trusted also really made me questions what exactly they were asking others to be entrusted with. Are they saying that they decide who to share their story with based on who they perceived to trust with their pride? Trust with their ego? Trust with their vulnerability? Trust to not judge? As well, if they are sharing people who they trust not to judge them, what specifically are they afraid to be judged for? It doesn't seem clear from the data what specifically people feared being judged for. This is something that I want to clarify in a follow-up interview with someone who said they feared being judged.