Attitudes Towards Online Dating and the Perceived Threat it Poses to the Future of Long Term Relationships

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Abstract

Online dating has become a massive industry and it is estimated that there is over 5,000 dating websites worldwide and close to 25 sites with over 1 million subscribers (onlinedatingmagazine.com, 2012). It is estimated that the industry is valued at roughly four billion US dollars worldwide (Blossfeld & Schmitz, 2011). There is very little research into this new dating landscape, particularly in Ireland. This study examined the experiences and attitudes of a random sample of the population aged between 18 and 39. A total of 191 participants were split into two groups based on age. The first predicted hypothesis was that the older group of adults would have a more positive attitude towards online dating than the younger group of adults. The second predicted hypothesis was that there would be a concern that online dating threatens the future of long term relationships.

The design of this study was quantitative with a quasi-experimental design; descriptive statistics were used as well as independent-sample t-tests used to compare scores and explore the differences in attitudes. The study showed that there are significant differences in attitudes towards online dating between younger and older adults with older adults having a more positive attitude. The study also revealed that there is no major concern that online dating threatens the future of long term relationships. The study suggests that people who use online dating or form relationships with people they meet through online dating may experience negative stigmatization and stereotyping. At the same time, as people approach their mid to late 30's their attitude towards online dating may become increasingly positive.

1. Introduction

The landscape in which people meet to form relationships has changed dramatically in the past 15 years. Traditional methods such as the workplace, the nightclub, friends of friends and family friends have been augmented by the internet. In the developed world it is no exaggeration to say that we are all connected. According to the world-bank close to 80 per cent of inhabitants in the developed world have access to the internet and it is widely recognised as the new frontier for human communication; it is also the new place to look for love.

Before the advent of the internet in the mid 1990's there was a section in the print media, newspapers and magazines for the classified personal ads, also known as the "lonely hearts column" which gave individuals a chance to advertise themselves in the hope of meeting someone to form a relationship with. It is not hard to imagine how the aforementioned "lonely hearts column" was a relatively stigmatised form of dating. It tends to stir up images of desperately isolated individuals who have experienced difficulty in meeting others in more open social settings like the pub or the workplace.

The internet, and specifically the search engine model has allowed for this practice to move into the virtual space. There are now vast databases of personal ads known as online dating sites where users can browse through seemingly infinite amounts of profiles based on any individual's preference. Age, location, sexual orientation, interests and even niche interests are all catered for (Blossfeld & Schmitz, 2011). It is estimated that there is over 2,500 dating sites in the Unites States of America (US) and another 5.000 sites worldwide with roughly 25 of these sites with over 1 million users subscribed (onlinedatingmagazine.com, 2012).

Online dating is effectively replacing the need for both people in the exchange to be present in the same time and space. The common perception may be that we are under increasing time pressure and our lives are becoming busier and more stressful. Online dating gives users the option to seek out partners and manage those relationships in a virtual world while they go about their daily lives while, at the same time, having the option to manage several potential partner relationships at the same time (Blossfeld & Schmitz, 2012). It offers the chance to meet similar minded people based on specified profiles and preferences and there is less reliance on the help of friends. There is also the anticipation of future contact based on common goals which are not always prevalent in traditional mating environments (Valkenberg & Peter, 2007).

The majority of statistical research into online dating has been carried out in the US. In a 2013 survey results showed that 11 per cent of all adults surveyed had used online dating, this was split by gender 13 per cent male and 9 per cent female (Smith & Duggan). Hogan, Nai & Dutton (2011) carried out a survey on couples spanning 18 different countries around the world it found that approximately 44 per cent of those surveyed had some exposure to online dating through dating sites as well as social networking, websites and personal contact. In Germany in 2008 nearly half of all single adults were members of online dating sites at over 54 million members (Aretz, Demuth, Schmidt & Vierlein, 2010). In a 2011 global survey Germany had the highest number of relationships which began online at 29 per cent. In the same study 22.6 per cent of surveyed relationships in the UK had begun online and in Ireland 15.7 per cent of surveyed relationships has started online (Hogan, Nai & Dutton, 2011). Ireland had the second lowest total for relationships beginning online out of the 18 countries surveyed. Of those couples who were surveyed in Ireland, 57 per cent of people said that they knew someone who had tried online dating and 23 per cent of people said that they knew someone who had married someone they met through online dating.

Ireland ranked 11th out of the 18 countries surveyed in these two categories. The top ranked country was Brazil where 81 per cent of people surveyed said they knew someone who had tried online dating.

There is a surprising lack of academic research around the online dating environment in Ireland. There have been a limited number of surveys carried out by online dating agencies such as anotherfriend.com (Barry & Hurley, 2011) but these surveys focus on individuals who are existing members of the service and not people who have never used online dating. It is difficult to locate statistics on attitudes towards and perception of online dating by the general public, or, on the numbers of Irish people currently subscribed to dating sites. In the 2011 census it was shown that there were over 1.5 million single adults over the age of 15 in Ireland but little information is revealed about their dating habits (Central Statistics Office, 2012).

1.1. Internet Usage

According to internetworldstats.com web publication the Internet is defined as "the worldwide interconnection of individual networks operated by government, industry, academia, and private parties". In December 1995 the internet had 16 million users, totalling 0.4 per cent of the world's population. By December 2000 that had grown to nearly 6 per cent of the world's population and by December 2014 there is over 40 per cent of the world's population with internet access.

In June 2014 in Europe there was 70.1 per cent internet user penetration as a percentage of the overall population and this represented a 452.4 per cent growth between 2000 and 2014. In Ireland 81 per cent of the population have access to the internet at home on any device (Internetworldstats.com). Ireland ranks 32 in the world for penetration of the population with internet access according to internetlivestats.com (internetlivestats.com).

Currently in Ireland the average 20 year old adult has had significant exposure to the internet since they were at least 10 years of age. The average 30 year old has had significant exposure since they were 20 years of age. In a 2012 poll by the British Science Museum it was revealed that 8 out of 10 under adults under the age of 25 would "feel lost without the internet", whereas only 6 out of 10 adults over the age of 25 would feel the same way if they had no internet (Bryant, 2012).

1.2. <u>Online Dating Age Profile</u>

It may seem, on first consideration that the most frequent users of online dating would be in the lower adult age bracket, somewhere between 18 and 25. This may stem from the idea that younger adults are better able to adapt to new technology and also the greater level of exposure that they have had to the internet from a young age. However, research would suggest otherwise. It is in fact the older adults who have become the most frequent users for a number of reasons which will be discussed further. Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) argue that the reason young people are less likely to meet their relationship partners online is because they are surrounded by other young singles and this reduces the significance and benefits of the internet search engine. They suggest that "in environments rich with potential partners, old fashioned face-to-face socializing still trumps online search". The research which was focused entirely on the US dating landscape suggests that;

"The Internet increasingly allows Americans to meet and form relationships with perfect strangers, that is, people with whom they had no previous social tie. Individuals who face a thin market for potential partners, such as gays, lesbians, and middle-aged heterosexuals, are especially likely to meet partners online." (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012)

The most conclusive online dating age profile's come from the US. There, the largest group of users come from the 25 to 34 age bracket making up 22 per cent. The second

highest percentage of online dating users comes from the 35 to 44 age bracket at 17 per cent. Hogan, Nai & Dutton (2011) state that only 10 per cent of those surveyed from the 18 to 24 age bracket had used online dating. In 2013 one of the largest subscribed online dating sites called Plenty of Fish (POF) reported that the average age of a POF user globally was 35 years old. POF reported at the same time that it had over 2.5 million active daily users of the site in the US and UK alone (datingsitesreviews.com, 2015).

In a 2010 study carried out on the German online dating landscape the results found that the average age of the participants surveyed who had used online dating was 38 (Aretz et al, 2010). This is supported by a 2011 German study which gave the example of one particular German online dating site where the average age of users was 40 (Schmitz, Sachse-Thürer, Zillmann & Blossfeld, 2011). It was reported in 2014 that In the United Kingdom a survey carried out by the online dating website AYI.com (Are You Interested?) found that out of its roughly 50,000 users the average age was 44 for men and 42 for women.

In the 2011 global relationships study it was found that since 1997 the highest percentage of relationships that started online by age bracket was the 50 to 59 bracket making up 38 per cent. Second was the 40 to 49 age brackets which had 35 per cent of relationships started online whereas only 19 per cent of the 20 to 29 year old age bracket relationships had started online (Hogan, Nai & Dutton, 2011). In Ireland the only recent source of age data for online dating site users was reported by Jill Murray (2014) stating that the average age of POF user in Ireland was 32 years.

1.3.   <u>Attitudes Towards Online Dating</u>

There appears to be a lack of research carried out on attitudes towards online dating. However the small body of research that has been carried out suggests that attitudes are certainly changing. Going back to 2003 in the Ney York Times it was suggested that;

"Online dating, once viewed as a refuge for the socially inept and as a faintly disrespectable way to meet other people, is rapidly becoming a fixture of single life for adults of all ages, backgrounds and interests" (Harmon, 2003).

Two years later it was argued by Anderson (2005) that people generally tended to look negatively on relationships that formed online, and also on the participants in those relationships. A mixture of myths, stigmas and some facts are posited throughout a number of papers to support this idea. It is suggested by Hogan, Nai and Dutton (2011) that a person's experience with online dating has a direct impact on their attitude towards online relationships. In the same paper the authors argue that the more you use or are exposed to online dating and the more success you have with online dating the more open you will be to the behaviour. If this holds true then it would be safe to assume that with the increasing numbers of people subscribing to online dating websites the overall attitudes to online dating will become more positive. The idea that these attitudes are changing is backed up by Blossfeld & Schmitz (2012). The authors note that online dating has changed from being unusual and stigmatised to being relatively main-stream and accepted and this in turn has led online dating to become an industry in itself. They use figures from Germany where the online dating market is worth in excess of 130 million Euros. However, having a successful business model does not automatically result in a socially acceptable norm practice, the German pornography industry is estimated to be worth over 640 million but it may not actually be seen as socially acceptable. While they argue that online dating is receiving an increasing amount of exposure due to media discussion, advertising and discussion with friends and acquaintances they also highlight that the stigma's attached with online dating still persist in many ways. If the stigmas are not still in existence it is still likely that they will be referenced (Blossfeld & Shmitz, 2011).

1.4.	Negative Attitudes to Online Dating

Schmitz et al (2011) discuss how there is a myth that people only use online dating because they are unable to find a partner offline in the traditional method. This perception is discussed and linked to users being "desperate" due to unfavourable traits or characteristics, or being generally undesirable in the offline environment. In the Pew Research Paper from the US 21 per cent of those surveyed agreed that the users of online dating are desperate, however this figure was reduced from 29 per cent in the same survey in 2005, indicating that attitudes are changing. The Pew research did not examine attitudes between different age groups. 2,252 adults were surveyed over the age of 18 but there is no examination of the attitudes broken out by age.

There is also common reference to online dating being a kind of last chance saloon for the undesirable. This may be a residual attitude from the early days of the internet when users were possibly seen as being shy, socially inept people (Velkenberg & Jochen, 2007). This is no doubt linked to the traditional print media "lonely hearts column" in traditional print media. The terms "nerd" and "geek" appear in a 2005 paper by Anderson (2005) associated with the type of people who us online dating, stereotypes such as these appear frequently in commentary in the area. Anderson highlights the idea that the users on online dating, and people who enter relationships formed online are stigmatized as "nerdy, desperate, and shy or even sex-craved predators". The paper discusses how previous research suggests that people who have never experienced or used online dating express negative attitudes towards the practice and these same people can express these attitudes to friends and family who do use online dating and form relationships online.

Another common narrative is that of fake profiles in online dating or users who lie about their personal details to increase their dating capital. Users may make themselves sound for example, younger, wealthier or more active than they are in reality. It is also suggested that it is predominantly men who are more inclined to lie about themselves

(Schmitz et al, 2007). A google search for online dating lies will bring up a long list of articles, tips and advice for would be daters to spot and avoid the liars. Articles such as "Online Profiles: 4 lies men tell" (Wygant, askmen.com) or "Why Do So Many People Lie in Online Dating" (Katz, evanmarckatz.com) highlight this consistent narrative. Schmitz et al (2011) survey of German online dating revealed that over 40% of users had never encountered someone who lied in his or her profile. A 2013 US study (Smith & Duggan, 2013) revealed that 54 per cent of online daters surveyed felt that other users had falsified their profiles. Rosenbloom (newyorktimes.com, 2011) suggests that over 80 percent of online dating users in the US misrepresent themselves in their profiles. However, she goes on to point out that the majority of lies tend to be relatively small scale. In 2006 Ellison, Heino and Gibbs referred to this practice as the attempt by users to present themselves by creating the "ideal self" in their profiles. The concern around lies and deceit is supported by Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts (2012) who state that overall the majority of users of online dating are concerned about the possibility of misrepresentation by other users.

Other negative attitudes exist around the possibility of harassment and Smith & Duggan (2013) show that 42 per cent of female online daters had experienced some sort of contact that they described as threatening, 17 per cent of men felt the same way. Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts (2012) in their Australian study uncovered other concerns around the risk of encountering physical or sexual violence and also the prevalence of scammers on online dating websites.

1.5.   Positive Attitudes Towards Online Dating

It's clear from the evidence above that there are many negative attitudes towards online dating either through a mixture of stereotype, stigma and experience. On the flip side

of that, positive attitudes towards online dating are fostered through one's own experience using online dating and can also be developed through friendship with users of online dating. Hogan, Li and Dutton (2011) describe how experience with online dating can result in "trust and confidence" in the service. They state that of Irish people surveyed, 57 per cent said that they knew someone who dated someone online and 23 per cent said they knew someone who married someone they met online. Interestingly they note that success levels in the use of the service are less relevant than having just simply experienced the use of it in relation to positive attitudes. Smith and Duggan (2013) highlight that 59 per cent of internet users agreed that online dating was a good way to meet people, again showing a positive trend from the same survey in 2005. However, as mentioned above, there was no distinction made between differing age groups in relation to this attitude. In the same study, over half of those surveyed agreed that it was beneficial to have such a wide choice of fellow users to connect with.

Segan (2014) comments in relation to the tendency of online daters to lie in their profiles argues that "Sure, people can lie on the Internet, but they can lie everywhere else, too, as you'd know if you've ever had a conversation with a stranger in a Las Vegas bar". He argues that online dating gives users the opportunity to meet people of similar interest online that they might never have conceivably met offline.

1.6 .   Online Dating and Long Term Relationships

Dan Slater (2013) wrote an article addressing the possibility that online dating could be a threat to the future of long term relationships. This threat would also impact the long term future of the institution of marriage. The argument is based on the assumption that due to the accessibility of alternative dating options, adults will be less inclined to stay in

relationships which are not seen to be "perfect". The article suggests that people will always be inclined to keep an eye out for an alternative rather than work hard at maintaining an existing long term relationship.

"Of course, no one knows exactly how many partnerships are undermined by the allure of the Internet dating pool. But most of the online-dating-company executives I interviewed while writing my new book Love in the Time of Algorithms, agreed with what research appears to suggest: the rise of online dating will mean an overall decrease in commitment" (Slater, 2013)

Another interesting argument raised in the article is around the business model of the online dating sites themselves. A user who finds a lasting relationship is almost certain not to return to the site which is a "lost revenue stream" for the business. Dating sites will target users who have not logged on for long periods of time with advertising campaigns highlighting the opportunity to find the "perfect" match for the user (Slater, 2013). Madrigal (2013) published a response in the same publication and gave a range of evidence supporting the contrary argument. Included was the argument that divorce rates for educated, wealthier individuals have been reducing for the past 30 years in spite of the fact that internet usage has been increasing. Overall, the paper suggests that there is no difference in the potential for long term relationships formed online or offline (Madrigal, 2013).

Schmitz et al (2011) examine the belief that online relationships are not "real" or "lasting" relationships. The authors find that in a comparison of participants studies, roughly the same percentage of couples who met online and couples who had met offline had declared their love for each other which would suggest no difference between the two. When

asked of their intentions to set up a common household together there was also no significant differences between the intensions of couples who formed offline or online. Bergstrom's (2011) paper examines whether online dating has created a new "sexual territory" which facilitates "casual dating" which would be the opposite of "serious" long term relationships. She finds that in France, heterosexual dating sites have enabled women to enter and exit sexual relationships without the possibility of negative judgement from their peers. Interactions on the sites are entered into with the explicit goal of entering a sexual relationship. The status of 'single' is clearly advertised and this expedites the whole process. However, Bergstrom also states that this environment has not created a "cruising area" for sex, as the sites also exhibit many of the traditional mating norms seen offline in its organisation, but it does certainly create a freer less inhibited environment for women seeking sexual encounters (Bergstrom, 2011).

Barry & Hurley (2011) survey carried out for one of Ireland's largest dating website, Another Friend, asked users whether or not they will ever marry. Almost half of all men and women said that they would marry and only roughly 15 per cent said they would not marry suggesting that the intention is to find long term partners for both men and women. In terms of the importance of the tradition of marriage which is also a factor, around 40 per cent of those users surveyed said that marriage was neither important nor unimportant, which does indicate some indifference to the institution of marriage, leaving aside the impact of online dating on the attitudes.

It appears that one can argue in either way regarding this area. On the one hand online dating enables individuals to seek out like minded partners with similar interests from a global pool of otherwise un-contactable people to seek out love. On the other hand online

dating creates an endless carousel of easily attainable short term sexual encounters. There is a distinct lack of research suggesting the dominance of either of these arguments.

1.7.   <u>Conclusions from the Literature Review</u>

It is clear from a review of all the literature relating to online dating that there is a lack of research undertaken in Ireland. The most comprehensive studies have been carried out in the US, Britain and Germany. The focus of the existing research is around a range of areas such as attitudes towards online dating, the characteristics of online daters, the motives of online daters and the changing face of the dating landscape and how this is affecting relationships. The most comprehensive recently compiled research carried out is in the US in which all aspects of online relationships and attitudes towards them are examined. However, no distinction is made in the study to the attitudes between differing age groups. In many of the other studies from around the world the stigma attached to online dating and the benefits of online dating are discussed and this raises many interesting questions. There is also evidence to suggest that a person's own experience in using online dating, or even knowing someone who has used online dating will result in a more positive attitude towards the practice. Conversely, those who have no experience or exposure to online dating are more inclined to express negative attitudes towards it. As the user-ship of online dating increases will this also lead to a change in the general perception of the practice?

Given the clear lack of research carried out in Ireland, bar a few studies carried out by online dating sites such as AnotherFriend.com, it is the goal of this research to examine the attitudes of both users and non-users of online dating and compare attitudes between a younger and an older cohort. The literature review has revealed that the average

age of the online dater is over 30, ranging from early to late 30's, depending on what country you're examining and the year of the research. At the same time, based on the growth of the internet it would appear that an individual who is 20 years old will have had more exposure to the internet growing up than an individual who is 30 or even 35. This research seeks to examine the attitudes towards online dating in Ireland and compare the differences in attitudes between the younger and older cohort in Ireland. In addition, there is an ongoing debate within the media and in academic literature around the impact that the rise in online dating is having on the future of long term relationships. Ireland has long been seen as a traditional catholic country where the institution of marriage and family is paramount to the social fabric of the country. Yet at the same time there is no research into the perceived impact that online dating is having on the formation of long term relationships. This study will examine whether there is a concern around the impact that online dating is having on long term relationships.

Therefore the proposed hypothesis of this research is that the older group of adults have a more positive attitude towards online dating than the younger group of adults. The second hypothesis is that there is a concern that online dating threatens the future of long term relationships.

2. Methods

2.1.   Design

The design of this study was quantitative with a quasi-experimental design; descriptive statistics were used to present the results as well as independent-sample t-tests were used to compare scores and explore the differences in attitudes towards online dating between the two different age groups. The age of the participants was the independent variable and attitudes towards online dating was the dependant variable. The study also predicted that there would not be a concern that online dating was a threat to future of long term relationships.

2.2.   Participants

A random sample of participants was used for this study. The sample consisted of 191 respondents (89 males and 102 females) currently living in Ireland and aged between 18 and 39 years old. The respondents were split into two age groups; 111 participants were selected from the 18 to 28 age group and 90 participants were selected from the 29 to 39 age group. The respondents were a mix of Dublin Business School (DBS) students approached during daytime and evening lectures and facebook users accessed using an online questionnaire. The online questionnaire was set up on Survey Monkey and distributed using the questionnaire link provided. No preference was given to whether the respondents had or had not used online dating websites in the past. The questionnaire did not examine whether the participants were Irish nationals, whether they were international students studying in Ireland or EU or Non-EU nationals living in Ireland.

2.3.   <u>Materials</u>

In this study a questionnaire was administered to all respondents. The questionnaire was made up of 2 sections. Section 1 was series of 7 questions examining people's experiences with online dating. Section 2 was a series of 12 questions examining people's attitudes towards online dating. Section 1 was made up of yes or no answers, whereas section 2 was made up of a 5 stage Likert scale. Each participant was also asked to state their gender and their age.

Section 1 was structured to examine whether respondents had used online dating websites or they knew someone who had used online dating websites. In the event that they had used online dating questions were posed in relation to their experiences. For example, had they gone on a date with someone they met on the website or had they ever been contacted by someone who made them feel harassed or uncomfortable.

Section 2 was structured to examine participant's attitudes towards online dating and their attitudes towards people who used online dating. A series of statements were put to the participants and they were asked to state their level of agreement with the statements ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. For example, they were asked to state their level of agreement with the statement 'people who use online dating sites are desperate' and 'online dating will increase divorce rates because people will have other options to meet new partners'.

A number of questions in section 2 on attitudes towards online dating were taken from the Smith and Duggan (2013) paper on online dating in the Unites States. For example, questions examining whether respondents agreed or disagreed that online dating was a good way to meet people or whether they agreed that people who used online dating were desperate. A number of other questions were chosen at random to examine the perceived threat posed to the future of long term relationships by online dating. For example, agreement or disagreement with the statement that online dating keeps people from settling down in long term relationships. The data collected was entered into the SPSS database software program and the data was analysed using this software.

2.4.   Procedure

The respondents were told that the purpose of the research was to examine attitudes towards online dating. They were presented with a questionnaire which included two sections. Section 1 was series of 7 questions examining people's experiences with online dating. Section 2 was a series of 12 questions examining people's attitudes towards online dating. Section 1 included yes or no answers and section 2 included a 5 stage Likert scale. The questionnaire also asked for the respondent's age and gender. They completed the questionnaire either in class in DBS or online using the Survey Monkey link which was distributed using facebook. All the respondents were thanked for their participation in completing the survey questionnaire.

3. **Results**

3.1. <u>Participants Experiences</u>

A number of descriptive statistics were first obtained in relation to the data as the study looked across frequencies to analyse the results. A total of 191 respondents were used in this research. There were 89 males and 102 females. The participants were split into two age groups, 18 to 28 years old and 29 to 39 years old. 111 participants belonged to the younger age group and 80 participants belonged to the older age group. 61 per cent (n = 49) of the older group said that they had used online dating compared 36 per cent (n = 40) of the younger group. The majority of participants in both age groups said they knew someone else who had used online dating, 84 per cent (n = 93) of the younger group and 91 per cent (n = 73) of the older group. A larger percentage of the older group, 59 per cent (n = 47), said that they had gone on a date with someone they had met on an online dating site compared with 31 per cent (n = 34) of the younger group.

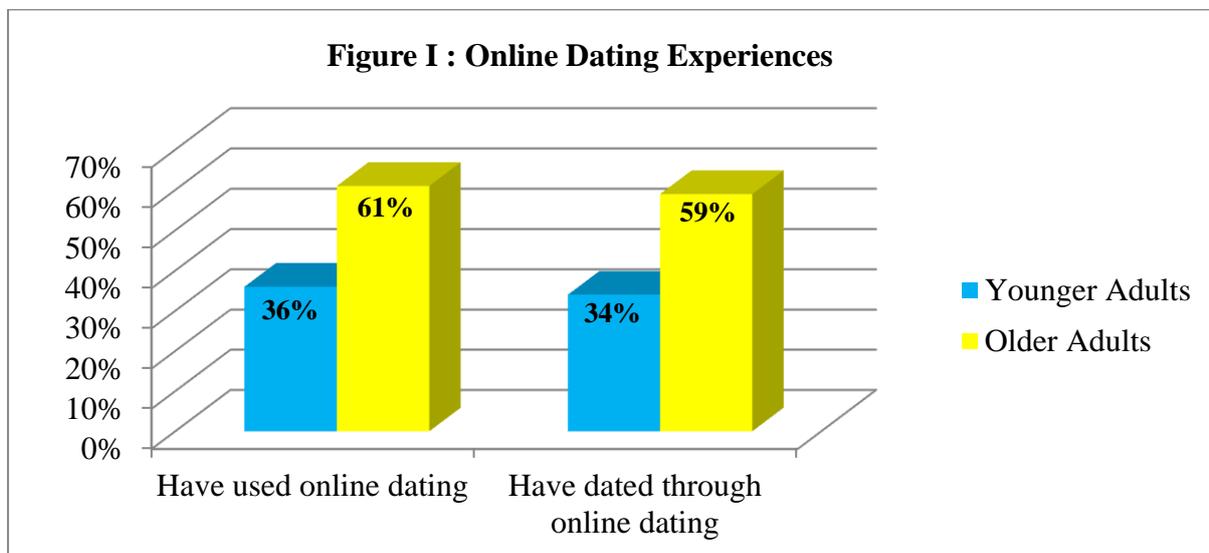*Figure I: Online Dating Experiences of Respondents*

Figure I : Online Dating Experiences

Figure I is a visual representation of the online dating experiences of the respondents in both groups. 61 per cent (n = 49) of the older group said that they had used online dating compared 36 per cent (n = 40) of the younger group. A larger percentage of the older group, 59 per cent (n = 47), said that they had gone on a date with someone they had met on an online dating site compared with 31 per cent (n = 34) of the younger group.

3.2. Attitudes in Relation to Online Dating

There were a number of inferential statistics performed on this data in order to explore the attitudes towards online dating between the younger adults and the older adults. The participants were presented with a statement regarding attitudes to online dating and they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement.

In relation to the statement 'online dating is a good way to meet people' the independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores between the younger adults (mean = 2.76, SD = 1.05) and the older adults (mean = 2.13, SD = .88). The t-test showed that there was a significant difference in the mean scores between the younger adults and the older adults $t(184.67) = 4.48$, $p < .001$ such that the older group have a more positive attitude towards online dating.

In relation to the statement 'online dating is not a safe way to meet people' the independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores between the younger adults (mean = 2.83, SD = 1.11) and the older adults (mean = 3.25, SD = 1.03). The t-test showed that there was a significant difference in the mean scores between the younger adults and the older adults $t(189) = -2.65$, $p < .01$ such that the older group have a more positive attitude towards online dating.

In relation to the statement 'most people misrepresent themselves on their online dating profile' the independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores between the younger adults (mean = 2.36, SD = .99) and the older adults (mean = 2.7, SD = .85). The t-test showed that there was a significant difference in the mean scores between the younger adults and the older adults $t(189) = -2.48$, $p < .02$ such that the older group have a more positive attitude towards online dating.

Lastly, in relation to the statement 'people who use online dating sites are desperate' the independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores between the younger adults (mean = 3.31, SD = 1.33) and the older adults (mean = 4.16, SD = .86). The t-test showed that there was a significant difference in the mean scores between the younger

adults and the older adults $t(187) = -5.4$, $p < .01$ such that the older group have a more positive attitude towards online dating.

3.3. Attitudes in Relation to the Threat to Long Term Relationships

The second hypothesis predicted that there is a concern that online dating threatens the future of long term relationships. Descriptive statistics were obtained in relation to the data as the study looked across frequencies to analyse the results. Participants were asked to state their level of agreement with two statements around online dating and long term relationships.

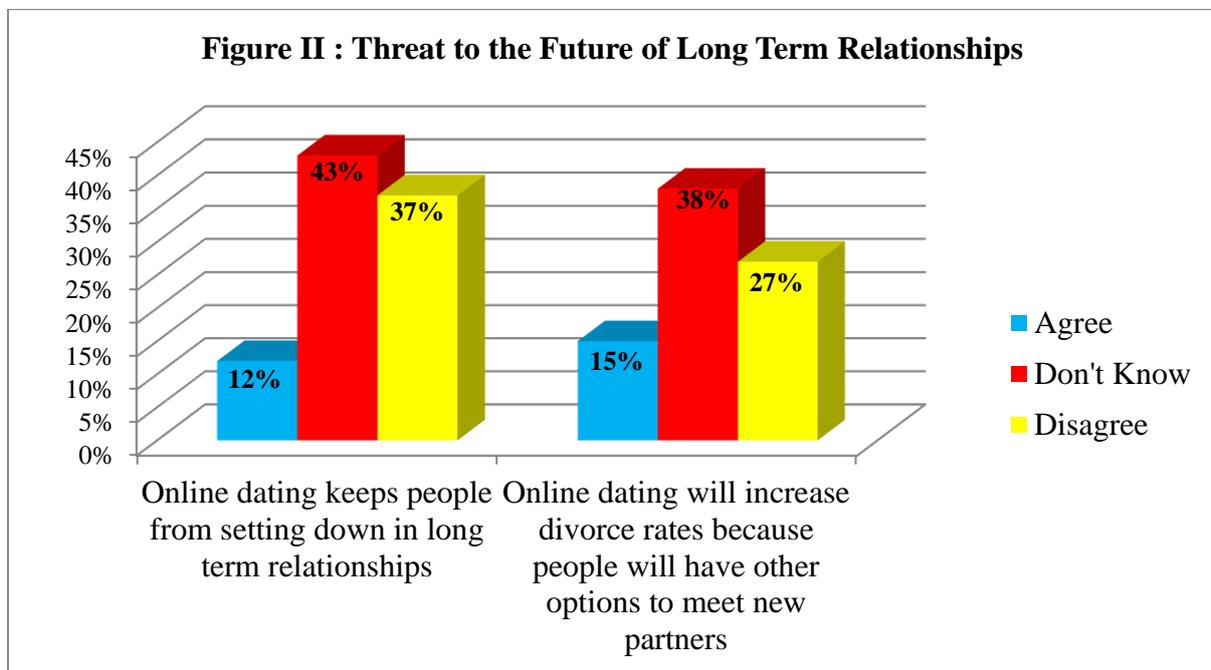*Figure II: Online Dating Experiences of Respondents*

Figure II is a visual representation of the respondent's answers to the statements regarding the threat that online dating poses to the future of long term relationships. The first

statement was 'online dating keeps people from setting down in long term relationships. 12 per cent of the total number of participants said they agreed with this statement and 37 per cent said they disagreed and 43 per cent said they did not know. The second statement was 'online dating will increase divorce rates because people will have other options to meet new partners'. 15 per cent of the total number of participants said they agreed with the statement, this was compared with 28 per cent who said they disagreed, 38 per cent said they did not know. The second hypothesis was not supported by the data as respondents showed that there was not an overall concern that online dating threatens the future of long term relationships.

4.   Discussion

This research seeks to examine whether there is differing attitudes to online dating between younger adults and older adults. The first predicted hypothesis of this research is that the older group of adults have a more positive attitude towards online dating than the younger group of adults. A series of questions around experiences using online dating and attitudes towards online dating were put to the participants. The second predicted hypothesis is that there is a concern that online dating threatens the future of long term relationships.

In relation to the first predicted hypothesis the results supported the hypothesis across a range of questions. Independent-samples t-test analysis was used to determine the scores of the older group and the younger group of adults. Four separate attitude statements were scored and analysed and in each result it showed that the older group of adults had a more positive attitude towards online dating. In addition the results showed, for each statement that there was significant difference between the two groups. For example, in

response to the statement 'online dating is a good way to meet people', 75.1 per cent of respondents in the older cohort either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, whereas 47.7 per cent of the younger cohort agreed or strongly agreed. Interestingly, the older adults reported more exposure to online dating through their own experiences. 61 per cent (n = 49) of the older group said they had used online dating websites compared with 36 per cent (n = 40) of the younger group. Similarly, a larger percentage of the older group, 59 per cent (n = 47), said that they had gone on a date with someone they had met on an online dating site compared with 31 per cent (n = 34) of the younger group.

The results support the evidence of the previous research in that the typical average age of those people who use online dating is above 30. However, the exact figures vary greatly from country to country (Hogan, Nai & Dutton 2011; datingsitesreviews.com 2015; POF 2013; Aretz et al 2010; Schmitz, Sachse-Thürer, Zillmann & Blossfeld 2011; Jill Murray 2014). In addition the results support the research that suggests that the social environmental factors surrounding the different age group has an effect on the likelihood that the responders have used online dating or have a positive attitude towards online dating. Taking the average age at which people get married in Ireland as 33 (breakingnews.ie, 2013), the younger group of adults are more likely to be surrounded by other young singles and would not experience as strong a need to use online dating. The older group are more likely to experience a "thin market for potential partners" and this pushes them towards the internet search engine and the benefits that it can offer when seeking a potential partner (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). The older group may be experiencing busy lives and have less time spent socialising in the traditional face to face social environments. Online dating gives these people the opportunity to meet potential partners in the virtual world as they go about their

daily lives. They can create specific searches based on their life preferences and reduce the possibility of wasted time (Blossfeld & Schmitz, 2012).

Younger adults who are surrounded by other younger adults are more likely to have greater exposure to potential partners in the traditional face to face locations such as colleges, bars and events are less likely to feel the need to seek out partners online (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). This is supported in this study by two of the descriptive statistics obtained. The first being the lower percentage of younger adults who have used online dating than the older adults and secondly by the lower number of younger adults who have gone on a date with someone they met online than the older adults. It is suggested in previous research that someone who has used online dating or who knows someone who has used online dating is more likely to have a positive attitude to online dating (Anderson 2005; Hogan, Nai and Dutton 2011). It is interesting to note it was suggested that the user's perceived success in using online dating is a less significant factor as simply having used online dating. In the same vein, the previous research suggested that if a larger portion of the older group has used online dating or knows someone who has used online dating they would have a greater likelihood of having a more positive attitude to online dating. On the flip side, if the younger group experience a lack of exposure to online dating then they are more likely to have negative attitudes towards it.

The second hypothesis predicted that there is a concern that online dating threatens the future of long term relationships. Descriptive statistics were used to determine whether this was a concern for the respondents and there was no distinction made between the two age groups. Scores were analysed from all 191 participants and they were asked to state their level of agreement with two statements around the risk to long term relationships

from online dating. When analysed, the results showed that there was no significant concern around a threat to long term relationships. These results support the previous research in this area relating to the Irish online dating landscape.

Barry & Hurley's (2011) research showed that over half of the respondents they surveyed from the dating site AnotherFriend.com planned to marry at some point in the future and only c. 15 per cent said they would not marry. Globally there has been a lack of research into this specific area and until now the narrative around online dating's threat to long term relationship has been addressed in opinion pieces (Slater 2013; Madrigal 2013) and some limited academic papers (Schmitz et al 201; Bergstrom 2011). Slater's (2013) argument was based around the effect that an endless carousel of potential partners would have on the users of online dating and how they would always feel there was a better option for them elsewhere. All they had to do was return to their dating website and scroll through the profiles and find a new partner. However the results of this study show that there is no major concern that this option is a threat to the future of long term relationships.

This research is relevant and interesting because it examines the dating landscape in Ireland. There are over 1.5 million single people over the age of 15 in Ireland and the ways in which they meet are changing. The traditional face to face meeting through work, family and friends is being augmented by the internet. If there is a general negative or positive attitude towards this form of meeting then this needs to be highlighted. 17 per cent of all 191 participants said that they had been in a long term relationship or married to someone they had met online and if they are the subject of negative stereotyping, which this study suggest they may experience at some stage then future study is needed into the reasons behind this. For example, the data showed that 32 per cent of the younger group said they agreed or

strongly agreed that people who use online dating are desperate. This would suggest that the users of online dating may well experience stigmatization at some point.

4.1.   Methodological Flaws and Limitations

There are a couple of methodological shortcomings within the current study that may have had an impact on the results. Firstly, the growth in geo dating is changing the way user's experience online dating. There is a shift away from online dating websites, which are database, search based websites to location mobile dating apps or "satellite dating". This involves setting up a profile on a dating app on your mobile phone and receiving notifications when potential mates are "nearby" (Quiroz, 2013). In the case of Grindr, or more recently Tinder the other person does not get notified that you "like" them until they indicate that they "like" you. In essence, this removes the possibility of rejection (Witt, 2014). On the more traditional online dating websites a user must indicate to the other person that they like them or they want to make contact and they face the possibility of a "no response" or rejection. Tinder is becoming increasingly popular and based on the parameters of location, and matching based on mutual swiping it may well be attracting younger users (Plummer, 2014). It would be interesting to research the numbers of the younger and older groups who have used location app dating in comparison to those who have used more traditional online dating websites and analyse the attitudes for each of those groups. If there are more young people using location based app dating then the attitudes towards online dating in the general sense may change in the near future.

Another methodological limitation within this research is around sexuality. There was no question asked relating to participants sexual preference and had there been a

grouping based on sexuality such as heterosexual, gay, lesbian for example the results may have shown some interesting frequencies around experiences and attitudes. As was highlighted by Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012), people who experience a "thin market for potential partners" are more likely to move towards the internet search based resources to seek out partners. A study between groups based on sexuality may provide valuable data around the motivations of users of online dating and highlight any significant differences in motivations between participants of different sexuality. This study compared the attitudes of an older group and a younger group of adults but it made no attempt to compere attitudes between people belonging to different groups based on sexuality and within each group research may uncover significant differences in user experiences and attitudes.

A third limitation is around the nationality of the participants taking part in this study. The questionnaire did not ask the participants to state their nationality or their study or working status in Ireland. The study is simply a random sample of people living in Ireland during the period the data was collected. Future research could be enhanced to examine participants separated into groups based on their nationality. This would allow the research to control for cultural differences which may exist between participants.

4.2.   Implications for Future Research

This research raises many questions for possible future study. Firstly, an examination into the relationship between a person's exposure to and experiences with online dating and the impact that it has on their attitudes towards it, i.e. is there a positive correlation between using online dating or knowing someone that has used online dating and attitudes towards online dating. The implications would be significant for the positive or negative

reaction people have to others who they know who use online dating or form relationships with people they met online. At present, this research suggests that there is negative stereotyping of people who use online dating and it would be interesting to examine whether these negative attitudes change over time. As participants get older do their attitudes to online dating become more positive as a result of coming into contact with more people who use or have used online dating.

Another direction for future research would be to group participants based on their sexuality and compare between groups for experiences and attitudes. In the same manner of this research the groups could then be split into younger and older age groups and comparisons could be made with the results of this study so see if the significant differences are replicated among the differing groups based on sexuality. In addition, data could be collected on the motivations of each group for using online dating. There is a consistent narrative around the different goals that users have when using online dating, for example some users may use online dating to seek out a long term relationship whereas other users may use online dating simply to look for short term sexual relationships, commonly referred to as "hook-up's".

A third area which would be relevant for future research would be the growing popularity of location based dating apps such as Tinder. As discussed above these relatively new mobile dating apps are changing the face of online dating from the database search model to a geographical proximity based search using your mobile phones satellite positioning. The most popular heterosexual location based dating app, Tinder, may well prove to be increasingly popular with the younger group of adults based on its search parameters and the elimination of the feeling of rejection based on the new model of

"matching". What is significant about this possible change is the effect it could have on a replica of this study carried out in 1, 2 or 3 years. If more young adults are using location based dating apps then the general attitudes to online dating expressed by young people may become more positive and lead to greater acceptance of people forming relationships online.

4.3. <u>Conclusion</u>

In conclusion, this study has shown that there is a difference in attitudes towards online dating between younger adults and older adults. The older group expressed a significantly more positive attitude to online dating and the users of online dating that the younger group. The younger group were more inclined to stigmatize the users of online dating and are far less likely to use online dating themselves. The research suggests that those people who do use online dating and those who ultimately form relationships with others they meet online may experience negative stereotyping and stigmatization. However, the older people get the likelihood is that those negative attitudes will change based on a number of factors which could be explored in more detail in future studies. It is clear that the older people get the more inclined they are to use online dating to seek out potential partners and the numbers of people using online dating is rising. It has become a huge industry in itself and the technology used by dating sites to match up users is also changing and this is leading to a different demographic of user participation. In time this may well lead to less stigmatization and stereotyping because of increased user-ship across both younger and older adults.

In addition, based on this research there is no major general concern that online dating is a threat to the future of long term relationships. Some users of online dating may

indeed be looking for long term relationships and some may be looking for short term "hook-up's" but in general this is not seen as a threat to the future of long term relationships. Although there is little doubt based on the evidence in the literature review that the narrative discussion on the topic will fade in the near future.

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Appendix I – Online Dating Experiences and Attitudes Questionnaire

Survey regarding attitudes towards Online Dating

This study is concerned with general attitudes towards online dating by those that have used online dating sites and those that have not used online dating sites. Please answer each question as honestly as you can. Any information that you give will remain anonymous, you are not required to write your name anywhere on this survey. I hope you will find this interesting and thank you in advance for your participation, your time and your co-operation.

What is your age:_____

What is your gender: Male_____   Female_____

1.   Have YOU, personally, ever used an online dating site such as Plenty of Fish, OKCupid!, eHarmony, AnotherFriend?   Yes   No

2.   Have you ever been in a long term relationship or been married to someone you met on an online dating site?   Yes   No

3.   Do you know anyone, personally, that has used an online dating site?   Yes   No

4.   Do you know anyone, personally, that has been in a long term relationship or been married to someone you met on an online dating site?   Yes   No

5.   Have you ever gone on a date with someone that you met on an online dating site?
                                                                                                         Yes   No

6.   Have you ever been contacted by someone through an online dating site in a way that made you feel harassed or uncomfortable?   Yes   No

7.   When using on online dating site, have you ever felt that someone else seriously misrepresented themselves in their profile   Yes   No

Many people have different opinions about online dating.

INSTRUCTIONS: Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements by circling the appropriate number to the right of the statement as follows.

1 = Strongly Agree

2 = Agree

3 = Don't Know

4 = Disagree

5 = Strongly Disagree

1.	Online dating is a good way to meet people	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Online dating allows people to find a better match for themselves because they can get to know a lot more people	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Online dating allows single people to meet other single people in non-traditional locations	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Online dating is not a safe way to meet people	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Most people misrepresent themselves on their online dating profile	1	2	3	4	5
6.	More men than women misrepresent themselves on their online dating profile	1	2	3	4	5

7.	More women than men misrepresent themselves on their online dating profile	1	2	3	4	5
8.	People who use online dating sites are desperate	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Online dating will lead to an increase in long term relationships	1	2	3	4	5
10.	People use online dating sites to look for long term relationships	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Online dating keeps people from settling down in long term relationships	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Online dating will increase divorce rates because people will have other options to meet new partners	1	2	3	4	5

Many thanks for your participation in this survey.