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Potarca, Gina

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CHAPTER 3. RELATIONSHIP PREFERENCES AMONG GAY AND LESBIAN ONLINE DATERS: INDIVIDUAL AND CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES⁴

Abstract

There is currently little knowledge about what gay men and lesbians seek in a romantic relationship. This paper extends the literature on gay men and lesbians' partnership preferences by engaging in the first large-scale empirical study of the long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs of gay and lesbian online daters across 53 regions in eight European countries (N = 24,598). Looking at profile and preference information, we examine both individual and contextual determinants in a series of multilevel logistic regression analyses. We show that lesbians give more importance to monogamy, but show less interest in starting a long-term relationship. We also reveal the importance of life course aspects such as relationship history and presence of children. Finally, we empirically demonstrate that social tolerance and legal recognition of same-sex unions are associated with higher long-term dating intentions and stronger monogamy beliefs.

⁴ A slightly different version of this chapter is forthcoming in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Co-authors are Melinda Mills and Wiebke Neberich. A previous draft of this study has been presented at the 'Revisiting Sexualities in the 21st Century' Conference in Nicosia, Cyprus, June 2013.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The last decades witnessed a continued rise in the visibility and legal rights of same-sex unions (Peplau & Fingerhut 2007; Rosenfeld & Kim 2005). Although gay men and lesbian women establish various types of relationships “from courtship to cohabitation to marriage-like unions with high commitment”, the topic remains largely empirically unexplored (Kurdek 2005, p. 254). Little is known about the relationship preferences that members of these sexual minority groups have in the initial stages of mate selection. Several studies have examined attractiveness standards and aspects that gay men and lesbians find desirable in a romantic partner (e.g., Gombrogge *et al.* 2007; Ha *et al.* 2012; Lippa 2007). The knowledge about what gay men and lesbians seek and value in a relationship, however, is underdeveloped.

In the current study we focus on two aspects of relationship preferences, namely long-term dating intentions (i.e., interest in starting a long-lasting relationship) and belief in monogamy (i.e., sociosexuality). Interest in long-term partnerships is generally found to correlate with strong norms favoring sexual exclusivity (Simpson & Gangestad 1991). This study jointly labels long-term dating intentions and strong beliefs in monogamy as high (or demanding) partnering standards. There is evidence, however, that willingness to engage in uncommitted sexual relations does not necessarily exclude long-term partnering intentions (Gangestad & Simpson 1990). This suggests that the two constructs might tap into different facets of mating preferences. Exploring an intentional as well as an attitudinal component of mating strategies provides more depth into the understanding of gay men and lesbians’ relationship preferences.

Examining the partnering standards of the two sexual minority groups needs to take into account the particularities of their dating markets (Schwartz & Graf 2009). Gay men and lesbians tend to reside in heterogeneous neighborhoods located in large urban centers (Peplau & Fingerhut 2007; Rosenfeld & Kim 2005). They also have increased geographical mobility, which reduces the immediate influence of family and friends (Schwartz & Graf 2009). Apart from residing in different social settings (Kurdek 2004), the limited size of their dating market means that they are also more prone to resort to non-traditional means for finding a partner. An increasingly popular way for gay men and lesbians to find available partners is via Internet dating (Peplau & Fingerhut 2007; Rosenfeld & Thomas 2012). Here they have greater chances of initiating romantic encounters by “minimizing their efforts and exposure to overt social scrutiny” (Lever *et al.*, p. 284). The Internet therefore increases the level of

access, affordability and privacy in searching for romantic and sexual encounters, as well as providing a wider variety of prospective partners (Tikkanen & Ross 2003). Despite the growing popularity of digital mating markets among individuals with same-sex preferences, there are no studies that examine gay men and lesbians' relationship intentions and values when searching for a partner online. Moreover, the partnering intentions and beliefs of gay men and lesbians have rarely been studied across different contextual settings. Due to the diverse levels of acceptance and legal recognition of same-sex relationships across different countries and sub-regions, we anticipate particular ties between contextual settings and gay men and lesbians' dating intentions and values.

The aim of this study is to examine how both individual and contextual determinants are related to the long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs of gay and lesbian online daters. At the individual level, we analyze the links between life course factors such as previous union experience and presence of children, and gay men and lesbians' relationship preferences. At the contextual level, we take into account variations in attitudes towards same-sex couples, and legal recognition of same-sex partnerships, across 53 regions in eight countries in Europe, namely the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy. Using data provided by a multinational online dating platform, we analyze the preferences and socio-demographic information provided by members who fill in an online dating profile. Based on the preference for partner's gender expressed on users' profile, we label women seeking women as lesbians and men seeking men as gay men. Despite the fact that seeking a same-sex partner on an online dating platform is not an unequivocal measure of sexual identity as enduring attraction towards the same sex, we believe that it does represent an active expression of one's (same-sex) sexual orientation.

Our study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, we extend the handful of literature on gay men and lesbians' partnering preferences with a large-scale empirical analysis. A second innovation is the examination of how relationship history or presence of children is related to the relationship values of gay men and lesbians, known to have distinct legal and reproductive contexts for both partnering and parenting. Third, due to the comparative aspect of this study, it will be the first to examine how the long-term dating intentions and the monogamy beliefs of gay men and lesbians are shaped by both individual characteristics and dating market conditions. This answers the call by Meier, Hull, and Ortyl (2009), who emphasized the need to study relationship values among sexual minorities across different social, legal and cultural contexts. Due to the lack of cross-regional and cross-

national comparative data of gay men and lesbians, this study will be the first to provide unique insights into whether gay men and lesbians' dating intentions and monogamy beliefs vary across local and national settings. Fourth, research is yet to address this topic by looking at real life choices and a genuine dating environment. During the last decade there has been a surge of studies examining various aspects of same-sex partnerships, such as: division of household labor (Kurdek 2006), relationship satisfaction (Otis *et al.* 2006), or partnership stability (Andersson *et al.* 2006; Kalmijn, Loeve, & Manting 2007). The limitation of previous studies is that they generally rely on small convenience samples based on snowballing methods that usually target magazine readers or members of gay organizations, which often lead to an underrepresentation of non-white or low-SES gay men and lesbians (Andersson *et al.* 2006; Jepsen & Jepsen 2002). This paper is pioneering in that it relies on unique large-scale data that permits a more robust and detailed examination of gay men and lesbians' relationship goals and beliefs. Furthermore, the non-reactive nature of the data (i.e., data gathered from a naturalistic setting) has the potential to offer a more truthful assessment of gay men and lesbians' intentions and beliefs in the initial stages of dating. Finally, due to the weak public visibility of gay and lesbian communities in certain countries (e.g., Italy), this is among the first studies that can examine the mate selection patterns of gay men and lesbians within such restrictive contexts.

3.2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Short- versus long-term mating strategies and monogamy beliefs

Sexual strategy theory (Buss & Schmitt 1993) supposes that both men and women developed a plural set of approaches to mating, including long-term as well as short-term partnering. Buss and Schmitt (1993) propose that short-term mating is pursued due to several advantages for men (e.g., increased number of children), as well as for women (e.g., immediate access to men's resources, possibility of assessing intentions and mate value of potential long-term partners). Long-term strategies, on the other hand, guarantee women a constant provision of men's resources and investments in rearing children. Long-term mating for men usually involves partnering with women of better mate value, avoiding the efforts of constantly pursuing potential partners, increasing the genetic quality of offspring, paternity certainty, dividing domestic and non-domestic labor tasks and so forth. According to this theory, individuals select either one of the two mating tactics of short- versus long-term partnering,

depending on both gender and context (Buss & Schmitt 1993; Asendorpf, Penke, & Back 2011; Gangestad & Simpson 2000).

An additional concept used to capture individual differences in human mating strategies is sociosexuality, which gauges variability in the disposition individuals have towards sexual relations outside of committed relationships (Simpson & Gangestad 1991). The two extremes on the sociosexual orientation continuum distinguish firstly between restricted individuals who place emphasis on sexual exclusivity, lengthy courtship, and substantial emotional investments in long-term relationships. The other extreme consists of unrestricted individuals who are more prone towards multiple sexual partners, more spontaneous sexual relations, and lower levels of investments and intimacy in relationships (Simpson & Gangestad 1991; Schmitt 2005). In the current study, we focus on the attitudinal component of sociosexuality, which is the belief that a relationship should be exclusive and thus refers to the normative endorsement of committed sex (Penke & Asendorpf 2008). We hereafter refer to it as monogamy attitudes or beliefs.

The theoretical arguments presented until now, however, are largely based on heterosexual men and women and center around reproduction. The evidence regarding gay men and lesbians' mating strategies and monogamy is scarce, with the few studies that have examined this topic producing conflicting findings. In the absence of direct theories and research that address the actual partnering preferences of gay men and lesbians in genuine dating situations, we focus on studies that examine generic relationship values or levels of commitment and stability of established same-sex couples. Meier and colleagues (2009) found no significant differences between gay men and lesbians in the way they rate lifelong commitment and faithfulness as important components for a successful relationship. Bryant and Demian (1994) likewise demonstrated that gay and lesbian couples display similar levels of relationship commitment; nevertheless, lesbians are more likely to form sexually exclusive partnerships and rarely violate monogamy agreements. In fact, norms regarding sexual restrictiveness seem to distinguish gay men and lesbians the most. Gay men generally score higher in terms of interest and acceptance of non-committed sexual relations and non-monogamous partnerships (Bailey *et al.* 1994). Moreover, Schmitt (2005) reveals that gay men have significantly higher levels of non-monogamous relationships, possibly related to having access to a dating market with potential partners with similar open attitudes towards uncommitted sex.

Relationship commitment among same-sex couples is also assumed to depend on the barriers individuals encounter when ending a partnership (Kurdek 2000; Peplau & Spalding 2000). The level of relationship dependence and commitment decreases when the barriers that prevent a person from dissolving a union are low and the quality of alternatives to maintaining it is high (Etcheverry & Agnew 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman 2010). Lau (2012) contends that female same-sex couples are more stable than male same-sex couples due to the fact that lesbians perceive more barriers to ending a relationship (e.g., lesbian households are more likely to include children), greater benefits from being in a relationship (e.g., women's lower income levels make it more advantageous to pool financial resources than for men), as well as scarcer partner alternatives (e.g., lesbians are less likely to inhabit large cities than gay men). Nevertheless, evidence is again inconclusive. Among same-sex couples, Andersson and colleagues (2006) found that female partnerships have higher divorce risks than male couples in Sweden and Norway, whereas Kalmijn *et al.* (2007) and Lau (2012) revealed greater stability for female same-sex partnerships in the Netherlands and the US, respectively. Based on previous research related to both relationship values and stability, we do not expect overt dissimilarities between gay and lesbian daters in terms of willingness to start a long-term relationship. Nevertheless, existing evidence regarding monogamy would lead us to expect a stronger belief in sexual exclusivity among lesbian women compared to gay men (*hypothesis 1*).

Life course determinants of gay men and lesbians' dating intentions

The life course aspects of relationship history and presence of children can influence the views and expectations that people have when initiating new partnerships (Poortman 2007), but this association is yet to be explored in relation to gay men and lesbians. The general lack of empirical evidence concerning the dissolution and re-partnering process of gay men and lesbians is related to the difficulty of assessing their pre- and post-dissolution relationships and parenting arrangements. The relationship experience of gay and lesbian parents often refers to unions and children born with different-sex partners (Andersson *et al.* 2006; Lau 2012; Peplau & Fingerhut 2007). Nevertheless, the dissolution of same-sex partnerships and the formal ties to children born or adopted within such unions are surrounded by a great deal of legal ambiguity, particularly in contexts where the legalization of same-sex unions is not permitted (Goldberg & Allen 2013).

When a same-sex relationship dissolves, non-biological parents often risk losing the relationship with their children who are only legally bound to the biological parent (Allen 2007). When institutional support to guide the commitments and obligations between previous partners, on the one hand, and between ex-partners and their children, on the other hand, is missing, gay and lesbian parents have to self-determine child custody and visitation, as well as stepfamily formation decisions (Allen 2007; Goldberg & Allen 2013). Even in countries that grant the legalization of partnerships for same-sex couples, parenting rights remain restrictive. Switzerland for instance, provides legal recognition for same-sex unions via registered partnerships, but it does not entitle same-sex couples to joint or second parent adoption (i.e., the legal process that allows same-sex partners to adopt their partner's biological or adopted child without ending the first parent's legal status as a parent). Despite the particularities of gay men and lesbians' socially and legally disputed family formation (Allen 2007), we draw on the literature that addresses the impact of life course factors on heterosexuals' partnering. We therefore assume that basic experiences such as forming partnerships and having children shape the dating agenda of individuals consistently across sexual orientation groups. Based on sometimes conflicting empirical evidence related to the influence of life course aspects on the re-partnering process of heterosexuals, there are a series of competing expectations that we now specify for gay men and lesbians jointly.

Relationship history

Compared to the never married, divorced individuals are often older. They also face a more constrained partnership market (i.e., a short supply of available and suitable potential partners), leading to a particular set of relationship needs and criteria for partner selection (de Graaf & Kalmijn 2003; Shafer 2013; Sweeney 1997). Frazier, Arikian, Benson, Losoff, and Maurer (1996) found that people who experienced divorce have weaker marital intentions than those who had never married, likely attributed to previous negative marital experiences. People with previous union experience are less emotionally engaged and make fewer investments in subsequent relationships (Poortman 2007). Particularly among separated individuals - who are not legally divorced and therefore unable to enter or invest in a formalized union - demanding partnering arrangements would be even less preferred. If we consider separated individuals who exit a cohabiting union, we would also expect lower relationship demands given their tendency to form a union with lower levels of commitment and investment than marriage to begin with (Brines & Joyner 1999; Cherlin 2004; Poortman

& Mills 2012). Therefore, we anticipate divorced and, even more so, separated individuals to have lower long-term dating intentions and weaker monogamy beliefs than those who have never married (*hypothesis 2a*). A competing hypothesis is that, provided a wide enough pool of potential candidates, individuals with union experience fine-tune their preferences towards a better-suited partner, entailing more selectiveness and higher requirements from subsequent relationships (Gelissen 2004). This could translate into a greater concern for starting a long-term relationship and a stronger belief in sexual exclusivity compared to the never married (*hypothesis 2b*).

When we consider widowed persons, research shows a strong preference for dating instead of traditional long-lasting partnerships (Carr 2004; McWilliams & Barrett 2014). Reasons for avoiding long-term relationships include: concern for losing newly found autonomy (McWilliams & Barrett 2014), reluctance to engage in emotional and instrumental care-giving for a new, possibly unhealthy spouse (Davidson 2001; Talbott 1998), potential deprivation of social security benefits associated with the deceased spouse upon remarriage, unwanted prospect of residential relocation (Carr 2004), or opposition of children to widowed parents' re-partnering (Moorman, Booth, & Fingerman 2006). Alterovitz and Mendelsohn (2013) show that older age is associated with less interest in sexual aspects and more concern with having a companion to share activities with. We would therefore expect less long-term dating intentions and weaker beliefs in sexual exclusivity among widowed daters in comparison to those who have never been married (*hypothesis 2c*).

Presence of children

Having children could also shape the dating priorities of individuals looking for a new partner. On the one hand, the presence of children can be perceived as a constraint to re-partnering. Across various national settings, multiple studies find that resident children have a negative effect on parents' re-partnering chances, and the quality of their new match, especially among women (e.g., de Graaf & Kalmijn 2003; Goldscheider & Kaufman 2006; Qian, Lichter, & Mellott 2005; Sweeney 1997). In addition to restricting the time and opportunities to find a partner, the presence of children is believed to decrease parents' mate value and their ability to attract suitable partners (Qian *et al.* 2005). Prospective partners could perceive non-biological children as a potential source of relationship conflict (de Graaf & Kalmijn 2003) and undesired financial and caring responsibilities (Stewart, Manning, & Smock 2003). In comparison to childless daters, gay and lesbian parents who wish to start a

new relationship might therefore anticipate unfavorable mating prospects and express less demanding dating preferences, meaning weaker long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs (*hypothesis 3a*). On the other hand, the presence of children is also shown to enhance parents' re-partnering prospects, particularly among men (Wu & Schimmele 2005). A positive perception of own mate value for men and the motivation to ensure a proper parenting environment for both men and women could attract a certain level of cautiousness in selecting a new partner (Bzostek, McLanahan, & Carlson 2012). Due to heightened expectations, the dating priorities of gay men and lesbians with resident children could point towards more long-term mating strategies and more value attached to sexual exclusivity in comparison to those without children (*hypothesis 3b*).

Contextual determinants of gay men and lesbians' dating intentions

A thorough understanding of the complexity of same-sex partnering behavior should take into account the multitude of factors that shape the manner in which romantic unions are initiated, maintained and ended (Kurdek 2004). Sexual strategy theory suggests that the choice between short- and long-term mating strategies is highly dependent on context (Buss & Schmitt 1993). Adopting a certain orientation to commitment and monogamy is also sensitive to the characteristics of the environment (Schmitt 2005). Therefore, when analyzing gay men and lesbians' dating intentions, it is essential to account for contextual influences. This study focuses on two types of contextual aspects: the normative climate towards same-sex couples, and the legal context of initiating same-sex relationships. The normative contextual predictor is addressed at the regional instead of the national level because of significant local variations in normative attitudes towards same-sex partnerships within the same national borders (see Table A3.1, *Appendix*). The legal context is examined at the national level given that in the European context, the same set of legal rights for same-sex unions often apply across all regions within a country.

Social and legal recognition of gay men and lesbians across Europe

Gay men and lesbians' partnering preferences and beliefs are also influenced by the level of informal (attitudes) and formal (legislation) tolerance toward same-sex unions within their environment (Lau 2012). Examining the US context, Patterson (2000) asserts that the transformation in societal attitudes and legal regulations of same-sex partnerships during the last decades have strongly influenced the outlook of gay men and lesbians' daily lives.

In order to grasp the variability in legal regulations of same-sex partnerships, an overview of different national contexts is outlined below. The European countries under focus in this study provide diverse landscapes of lesbian and gay rights and, more specifically, of legal recognition for same-sex couples. Table 3.1 provides a summary of same-sex partnership and parenting rights across countries. In 2001, the Netherlands was the first country in the world that provided same-sex couples access to civil marriage. In Spain, marriage became available for same-sex couples in 2005, while in Sweden it became legal in 2009.

TABLE 3.1. Same-sex Partnership and Parenting Rights across Countries

	Partnership recognition		Parenting rights		
	Registered partnership	Marriage	Joint adoption	Second parent adoption	Medically assisted insemination (lesbian couples)
The Netherlands	✓ ^a	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sweden	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spain	✓ ^b	✓	✓	✓	✓
France	✓ ^c	✗ ^d	✗	✗ ^e	✗ ^e
Germany	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
Austria	✓	✗	✗	✗ ^e	✗
Switzerland	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Italy	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗

Source: ILGA-Europe

Notes: ^a Cohabiting same-sex couples have virtually the same rights as cohabiting different sex couples.

^b In certain regions only.

^c Limited rights.

^d Legalized since 2013.

^e Allowed since 2013.

The second group of countries that do not provide same-sex couples access to civil marriage but do allow for registered partnerships (i.e., legally recognized forms of partnership similar to marriage, also referred to as civil unions) is represented by France, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. In France, lesbian and gay couples can benefit from a legal arrangement similar to marriage through the Civil Pact of Solidarity (PACS) since 1999. Same-sex marriage actually became legal in France as of May 2013. But given that the time of data access is September 2011, France is included in the group of countries that allow for registered partnerships only. The PACS allows couples, irrespective of gender composition, to sign a contract that defines their partnership along various aspects such as property,

taxation, health insurance etc. Nevertheless, couples in registered partnerships have no rights of shared parental authority, adoption, or access to medically assisted reproduction (Waldijk 2009). In Germany, registered life partnerships for same-sex couples are permitted since 2001, providing several of the rights and benefits that married (different-sex) couples have, except for presumption of paternity or joint adoption. Since 2004, same-sex couples in Germany are eligible to apply for second parent adoption of each other's biological children, though the responsibilities assigned to the adopting parent remain limited (Waldijk 2009). In Austria, same-sex couples can register their partnership since 2010, benefiting from similar rights as married couples, with the exception of fertility treatments or joint adoption (second parent adoption for same-sex couples was eventually enforced in August 2013). Switzerland recognizes same-sex registered partnerships since 2005, ensuring the same rights as marriages in terms of social security, insurance, taxation or property. Swiss same-sex couples are not entitled however to fertility treatments, joint or second parent adoption rights.

A third category examined in this study and represented by Italy are those countries that do not recognize any type of same-sex unions, nor provide any parenting rights to same-sex couples. Italy was one of the first European countries to decriminalize same-sex sexual behavior in the second half of the 19th century. Nevertheless, any attempt at legalizing civil unions for same-sex couples in this staunchly Catholic country has failed. In Italy, same-sex partnering is therefore "neither persecuted nor protected by law, and it must remain private," leading to a repressed public awareness of gay and lesbian rights, as well as a closeted life for same-sex couples (Lingiardi 2005: 91).

The societal climate and degree of legal recognition of same-sex couples define gay men and lesbians' uniqueness in the way they initiate, maintain and negotiate their partnerships (Lannutti 2007). Social and legal sanctions are also believed to shape individual variation in mating strategies (Buss & Schmitt 1993). The lack of legal recognition of same-sex partnerships has the potential to make gay men and lesbians less willing to invest in long-term arrangements due to increased uncertainty regarding the relationship's time horizon (Lau, 2012). Furthermore, the social marginalization of same-sex partnering often leads to the concealing of relationships for gay men and lesbians (Otis *et al.* 2006), as well as negative perceptions of relationship quality and longevity (e.g., Frost & Meyer 2009; Frost 2011). The legal possibility of marrying a same-sex partner alters individuals' expectations about their future, leading to a potential reconsideration of relationship values (Lannutti 2007). Given increased relationship rewards and heightened feelings of security and stability, formalized

same-sex partnerships are associated with higher levels of relationship commitment and investments (Fingerhut & Maisel 2010). As opposed to homophobic environments which usually add multiple relationship stressors and uncertainty about the future among members of same-sex couples (Frost 2011; Otis *et al.* 2006), societal acceptance could lead to less ambiguity for long-term prospects, more visible partnering behavior and greater relationship investments. Contexts of both social and legal recognition of same-sex couples should therefore encourage gay men and lesbians to pursue longer-term relationships and favor monogamy (*hypothesis 4, hypothesis 5*).

3.3 DATA AND METHODS

Data and sample

We analyze anonymized profile and preference information of gay and lesbian members registered at the eDarling online dating site. In an agreement with the company, data were accessed in September 2011. Launched in early 2009, eDarling is an online dating company that provides online matchmaking services targeted at a broad audience, allowing searches for different-sex as well as same-sex partners (the website does not provide specific services for individuals with a bisexual orientation). It is currently based in 20 countries in Europe and Latin America, including the 8 countries under focus in this study, which had an active website and comparable database of users at the time of data access. The company is one of the largest European partner agencies on the web. In Germany, for instance, eDarling tops the ranking of online dating services having roughly twice as many users as their main competitor (Süllhöfer 2013).

We examine the data of users with same-sex preferences in the previously mentioned 8 European countries. The total sample consists of 24,598 gay and lesbian online daters. Table A3.1 in the *Appendix* provides information about the sample distribution across countries and sub-regions within countries for the full sample and the samples by sexual orientation. The gender distribution across regions is mostly balanced, with some exceptions of over-representation of gay men in Zurich (Switzerland) or Insular Italy, as well as an over-representation of lesbian women in North-Western Switzerland.

The website provides the possibility of enrolling as either a non-premium (free) or a premium (paid) member. Non-premium membership includes registration, filling in an entry questionnaire of 283 questions and the chance of browsing through the proposed profiles of

candidates, without being able to inspect their photos or exchange e-mails. To gain access to pictures and to establish and react to contacts, a monthly subscription fee is required (premium membership). Because the data were accessed at one point in time, it may be that some non-premium members eventually became premium members. The entry questionnaire includes a personality test, personal details (e.g., age, occupation, educational level, race, religion, marital status, height, lifestyle habits etc.), importance awarded to partner's characteristics (e.g., education, physical appearance), as well as preferences for potential partners in terms of age, height, geographical location, fertility history and plans, lifestyle habits, and race. The data analyzed in this study focus on the user profile information and the dating preferences and beliefs that people express when filling in the entry questionnaire. More precisely, we look at how interested daters are in pursuing long-term relationships and their monogamy beliefs as main dependent variables, as well as at their socio-demographic descriptors as either explanatory or control factors.

The postcode information in the dataset is used to link individuals to a certain region within a particular country. We then attach macro-level variables that measure contextual aspects referring to attitudes and legal recognition of same-sex partnerships, which are taken from statistical offices or cross-national surveys, described in more detail below. The regional units correspond to the Eurostat's Nomenclature of Statistical Territorial Units classification scheme (NUTS). In order to comply with data confidentiality agreements, we coded regions at the NUTS-1 level, which corresponds to large-scale regions (ranging from 3 million to 7 million inhabitants), which led to a classification of 53 regions.

Sample representativeness

Due to the absence of official statistics concerning the size and composition of sexual minority groups across Europe (Festy 2007), it is difficult to assess how representative our sample of online daters is of the entire lesbian and gay population in each of the 8 countries. Nevertheless, to get a glimpse of who participates in online dating among gay men and lesbians, we rely on data from the first wave of the 'How Couples Meet and Stay Together' (HCMST) survey (Rosenfeld, Thomas, & Falcon 2011), collected in 2009. HCMST is a nationally representative longitudinal survey of English-speaking adults in the U.S. and it targets persons who are either married or in a romantic or sexual relationship. One of the advantages of the data set is that it provides information on how the respondent originally met their partner (for more details, also see Rosenfeld & Thomas 2012). We took a sub-sample of

lesbian and gay respondents and examined key socio-demographic characteristics of those who met their partner through online dating sites in comparison to those who met their match elsewhere (e.g., via family, friends, school, religious venues, workplace, etc.). Although the HCMST data refer to gay men and lesbians who have successfully entered a partnership in the U.S., it can nonetheless be informative of the socio-demographic profile of individuals who search for a partner through Internet dating. Table 3.2 shows that gay men and lesbians who met their partner through online dating are similar to those that met their partner in other circumstances with respect to previous marital experience, religion, residence, education or number of children in the household. But if matching occurred through Internet dating, gay men and lesbians are significantly more likely to be non-White and slightly younger. The

TABLE 3.2. Comparison of Same-sex Couples that Met through Online Dating ($N = 50$) and Elsewhere ($N = 418$)

	Online dating	Elsewhere	Significance test
% Respondents previously married (before current partner)	32.0	24.9	$\chi^2(1) = 1.19$
% Race			$\chi^2(3) = 9.15 *$
White	66.0	82.3	
Black	10.0	3.8	
Hispanic	18.0	8.9	
Other	6.0	5.0	
% Religion			$\chi^2(3) = 3.00$
Catholic	30.0	30.6	
Other Christian	58.0	48.6	
Non-Christian	2.0	6.9	
No religion	10.0	13.9	
% Zip-code is rural	8.7	6.9	$\chi^2(1) = 0.20$
	Mean (S.D.)		
Respondent age (years)	46.02 (9.61)	49.43 (12.09)	$t(69.01) = 2.30 *$
Respondent education (years)	15.26 (2.17)	15.48 (2.34)	$t(466) = 0.64$
Number of children in the household	0.04 (0.20)	0.11 (0.47)	$t(129.23) = 1.94$
N (unweighted)	50	418	

Source: Unweighted data from How Couples Meet and Stay Together, Wave 1.

Notes: The number of gay and lesbian couples is too small to be analysed separately.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

over-representation of young adults and racial minority members is consistent with previous online dating studies (e.g., Hitsch, Hortacsu, & Ariely 2010). Given that being young or non-White is associated with lower dating intentions and less importance given to sexual

exclusivity (Ha *et al.* 2012; Harris & Lee 2006), we expect to encounter potentially more liberal attitudes towards partnerships than would be expected from a general population of gay men and lesbians.

Measurement of variables

Individual-level variables

Dependent variables. Long-term dating intentions is measured via the item ‘I am looking for a long-term relationship,’ which includes a seven-point scale ranging from 1 meaning ‘not at all’, to 4 ‘somewhat’ and 7 ‘very much’. The belief in monogamy is measured on the same type of scale with the item: ‘I believe a serious relationship needs to be exclusive (i.e. monogamous).’ For both variables, most responses clustered at the right extreme of the distribution with approximately three quarters of daters choosing 5, 6 or 7 on the scale. Given that not all of the seven categories contained enough cases (only 3.6% of individuals mentioned being ‘not at all’ (1) interested in a long-term relationship, and 4.4% believe a serious relationship needs to be ‘not at all’ (1) exclusive) to support multilevel regression analyses with interaction terms (as described later), we opted to dichotomize the scale. Individuals who are highly interested in long-term dating and hold strong beliefs in monogamy (5-7 on the original scale) are coded as 1, whereas those who have low or only moderate long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs (1-4 on the original scale) are coded as 0.

Gender is created combining the information on gender and the type of partner the online dater is seeking for (man or woman), and is divided by gay man (reference) and lesbian woman. *Previous union experience* is gauged by looking at the answers to the following question: ‘Which of the following statements applies to your marital status?’. Online daters can choose between four different options: ‘I have never been married’; ‘I’m divorced’; ‘I live in separation’; or ‘I am widowed’. No information is provided about whether the separation refers to a formal or informal union, or whether people exited a union with a different-sex or same-sex partner. *Resident children* is measured through the question ‘How many children under 18 live with you?’ with the following 4 options: no children (reference), one, two, and three or more children. As stated previously, this measure does not actually require the child to be biologically or legally related to any of the adults in the household.

Finally, we take into account a set of control variables that have been found to be important predictors from previous studies, including educational level (Alston & Tucker

1973), age (Ha *et al.* 2012), race (Harris & Lee 2006), religion (Nock, Sanchez, & Wright 2008), and type of membership. For *educational level*, we harmonize and group each country's particular categorization for education according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) code. We differentiated between three educational levels and created three dummy variables, which range between: the reference category of low (ISCED levels 0 'preprimary education', 1 'primary education or first stage of basic education', and 2 'lower secondary or second stage of basic education'), medium (ISCED 3 '(upper) secondary education' and 4 'post-secondary non-tertiary education') and high (ISCED 5 'first stage of tertiary education' and 6 'second stage of tertiary education'). *Age* is a continuous variable ranging from 18 to 95 years. *Race* is a categorical variable with the following values: European, Hispanic (Latin American), Arabic, Asian, African, or other. The initial categorization included Indian as racial group, but it was later recoded into the broader Asian category as the differentiation between the two groups is not very explicit. *Religion* distinguishes between Christian (reference), Muslim, Buddhist, atheist, non-religious believer (also referred to as 'spiritual' without adhering to a particular religion), and other denominations. Finally, we control for user's *type of membership*, which is non-premium or premium.

Contextual-level variables

The first contextual-level independent variable refers to general *attitudes towards same-sex couples*, for which we use data from the 2008 wave of the European Values Survey (EVS 2008) and the item 'Homosexual couples should be able to adopt children'. Because the measure addresses same-sex couples' parenting rights, it appropriately gauges the degree of tolerance and acceptance of same-sex partnering at a tangible level, which in this case is family formation. The variable is measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ('agree strongly') to 5 ('disagree strongly'). We reverse the scale and compute an aggregated mean score at the regional level, so that high values represent positive attitudes towards same-sex couples. To facilitate the interpretation of results, this measure is centered around the mean. Secondly, as discussed in Table 1, we used information about the *legal recognition of same-sex couples* provided by ILGA-Europe (the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Intersex Association) (2012). As previously mentioned, we differentiate between no legal recognition (reference category), registered partnerships, and legal marriage.

Analytical Procedure

The first step in the analyses is to examine the main socio-demographic characteristics of the gay men and lesbian women in our sample. Using *runmlwin* (Leckie & Charlton 2013) in Stata we then engage in multilevel logistic regression analyses (Bryk & Raudenbush 1992; Snijders & Bosker 2012) for the two binary outcomes described above. We estimate random intercept models with two levels that account for the existence of variation in long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs across the 53 regions. This allows us to take into consideration the hierarchical nature of our data and adjust standard errors for the non-independence of observations (i.e., individuals) nested within the same context (i.e., region). Multilevel analysis acknowledges the existence of different levels of variation (i.e., within- and between-region differences in relationship preferences), while also allowing the examination of both individual- and contextual-level predictors.

We first looked at associations between each outcome variable and gender, previous union experience, resident children, and control measures (Model 1). Despite formulating hypotheses that broadly refer to both gay men and lesbians, we are nonetheless empirically interested in assessing further similarities and differences between the two groups. To see if the link between life course characteristics and relationship preferences differs between gay men and lesbians, we subsequently include interactions of the main individual-level predictors by gender (Model 2). This is followed by the introduction of contextual-level variables. The correlation between the macro-level measures of attitudes towards same-sex couples and legal recognition of same-sex partnerships is moderately high ($r = .66, p < .01$). Diagnostic checks using the *collin* option in Stata detected multicollinearity if both predictors were included in the same model. To overcome this problem, we estimate the two contextual predictors in separate models (Models 3-4). Finally, to examine if the association between contextual aspects and relationship preferences differ between gay men and lesbians, we run additional analyses in which we test cross-level interactions between each macro-level measure and gender (Models 5-6). To reduce potential bias due to compositional effects, we also control for the regional-level composition of the website by including aggregated percentages of key socio-demographic variables (i.e., education, age). All models are fitted using 10,000-iteration Monte Carlo Markov Chain (MCMC) estimations, which lead to more accurate results when running multilevel non-linear analyses (Browne 2009). MCMC diagnostics confirm MCMC convergence and indicate that 10,000 iterations represent a suitable chain run length. To compare the overall fit of models we use the Deviance

Information Criterion (DIC) diagnostic, with models with lower DIC values being preferred over models with higher DIC values.

3.4 RESULTS

We first show descriptive statistics and then turn to the testing and discussion of our hypotheses with reference to the results of multilevel logistic regression analyses.

Descriptive results

Table 3.3 presents descriptive statistics for the individual-level variables used in the analyses of long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs. First, we find that gay men have slightly higher long-term dating intentions, whereas lesbians rate monogamy as important to a somewhat higher extent. The correlation between the two outcome variables is significantly positive for both gay men and lesbians. This shows that individuals who prefer long-term dating indeed also tend to have positive attitudes towards monogamy (Simpson & Gangestad 1991). Nevertheless, the modest correlation scores confirm that the two variables capture distinct concepts of relationship preferences. Moreover, Table 3.3 indicates that gay men are less likely to have been married previously (74.1% compared to 66.7 for lesbian women). Lesbian women have more formalized relationship experiences, with 29.1% of them being either divorced or separated. Lesbian women are also more likely to have resident children (cumulated 21.1%), whereas gay men more often declare the absence of any resident children (89.7%). Gay men are slightly more likely to be highly educated (32.2%). The majority of online daters are young (mean age of approximately 35 years) and of European ancestry. Finally, both gay men and lesbians report being Christian or atheist to the largest extent.

TABLE 3.3. Summary Statistics of Individual-level Variables Used in Regression Analyses

	Full sample	Gay men	Lesbians	Gender Difference
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
Long-term dating intentions (range: 0-1)	74.3	75.3	73.1	***
Monogamy beliefs (range: 0-1)	72.6	70.9	74.6	***
Correlation between dependent variables	0.48 ***	0.51 ***	0.44 ***	
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Previous union experience				***
Never married	70.7	74.1	66.7	
Divorced	13.7	12.1	15.5	
Separated	11.8	10.3	13.6	
Widowed	3.8	3.6	4.1	
Resident children				***
No children	84.7	89.7	78.9	
One	7.9	4.8	11.4	
Two	4.5	2.9	6.4	
Three or more	3.0	2.6	3.3	
Educational level				***
Low	20.0	20.7	19.3	
Medium	49.4	47.2	52.0	
High	30.5	32.2	28.7	
Race				
European	84.4	84.4	84.2	
Hispanic	3.9	4.2	3.5	
Arabic	2.3	2.5	2.0	
Asian	2.4	2.6	2.3	
African	1.9	1.8	2.0	
Other	5.1	4.4	6.0	
Religion				***
Christian	31.8	32.3	31.2	
Muslim	3.4	3.6	3.1	
Buddhist	1.5	1.3	1.7	
Atheist	33.1	32.1	34.3	
Non-religious believer	23.2	24.0	22.3	
Other	7.1	6.8	7.4	
Type of membership				*
Non-premium	96.8	97.0	96.5	
Premium	3.2	3.0	3.5	
		Mean (S.D.)		
Age (range: 18-95)	34.6 (12.6)	35.1 (12.8)	34.0 (12.3)	
Total N	24,598	13,132	11,466	

Source: Database of gay and lesbian members of eDarling dating site, September 2011.

Notes: S.D. = standard deviation.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Multilevel logistic regression results

Table 3.4 reports the estimated coefficients for Model 1, which tests the association between outcome variables and gender, previous union experience and resident children, while controlling for various other characteristics. Our first hypothesis proposed that lesbians have stronger monogamy beliefs than gay men. Results corresponding to Table 4 provide clear

evidence to support this expectation. Lesbian online daters indeed display a stronger belief in sexual exclusivity. Although no explicit theoretical expectation was proposed with respect to long-term dating intentions, the results show that lesbians have significantly less long-term plans than gay men.

The following set of hypotheses proposed that gay men and lesbians with past union experience (e.g., divorce, separation) have weaker (hypothesis 2a) or stronger (hypothesis 2b) long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs than the never married. We also anticipated that there would be a negative association between relationship preferences and being widowed (hypothesis 2c). Model 1 indicates virtually full support for hypotheses 2a and 2c. We find that the separated and widowed are less likely to pursue a long-term relationship or to value monogamy. Model 2 adds a previous union experience by gender interaction, which proves significant by means of a post-estimation Wald test. Results are easier to interpret if we plot predicted probabilities of long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs by previous union experience and gender (Figure 3.1). Results indicated that union experience differences in relationship demands were greater for lesbians than for gay men. In particular, divorced lesbians showed higher long-term dating intentions and stronger monogamy beliefs than both never-married lesbians and those who were currently separated or widowed. Among gay men, on the other hand, the divorced, separated, and widowed were similar in having less demanding relationship preferences than the never married. Furthermore, Model 2 and Figure 3.1 show that the previous finding of lesbians being less likely to prefer long-term dating than gay men only applies to the never married. Contrary to this, divorced lesbians displayed higher long-term dating intentions than divorced gay men. In the third set of hypotheses we tested whether daters with resident children would have weaker (hypothesis 3a) or stronger (hypothesis 3b) long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs compared to those without resident children. Model 1 provides nearly full support for hypothesis 3a. Individuals who have at least two co-resident children have a significantly lower interest in starting a long-term partnership and weaker beliefs in monogamy than those without children. The negative association between resident children and relationship preferences becomes significant and larger when the number of resident children increases. Therefore, the more children present in the household, the less likely gay men and lesbians are to pursue long-term relationships and hold strong monogamy beliefs.

TABLE 3.4. Multilevel Logistic Regression Results Predicting Long-term Dating Intentions and Monogamy Beliefs, by Individual Level Characteristics ($N = 24,598$, 53 Regions)

	Long-term Dating Intentions				Monogamy Beliefs			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	b	(SE)	b	(SE)	b	(SE)	b	(SE)
<i>Fixed effects</i>								
Intercept	0.90***	(0.07)	0.95***	(0.07)	0.79***	(0.08)	0.82***	(0.08)
Gender: Gay man (ref.)								
Lesbian	-0.08**	(0.03)	-0.17***	(0.04)	0.25***	(0.03)	0.20***	(0.04)
Previous union experience:								
Never married (ref.)								
Divorced	-0.05	(0.05)	-0.23***	(0.07)	0.05	(0.05)	-0.07	(0.06)
Separated	-0.25***	(0.05)	-0.31***	(0.07)	-0.12**	(0.05)	-0.16*	(0.07)
Widowed	-0.32***	(0.08)	-0.23*	(0.11)	-0.29***	(0.08)	-0.23*	(0.10)
Resident children: None (ref.)								
One	-0.07	(0.06)	-0.18	(0.09)	-0.03	(0.06)	-0.17	(0.09)
Two	-0.27***	(0.07)	-0.28*	(0.11)	-0.26***	(0.07)	-0.19	(0.11)
Three or more	-0.74***	(0.08)	-0.91***	(0.12)	-0.77***	(0.08)	-0.86***	(0.12)
Previous union experience × gender interaction								
Divorced × lesbian			0.35***	(0.09)			0.24**	(0.09)
Separated × lesbian			0.14	(0.10)			0.07	(0.09)
Widowed × lesbian			-0.14	(0.15)			-0.13	(0.15)
Resident children × gender interaction								
One × lesbian			0.14	(0.12)			0.21	(0.12)
Two × lesbian			-0.005	(0.14)			-0.12	(0.14)
Three or more × lesbian			0.30	(0.16)			0.16	(0.16)
Education: Low (ref.)								
Medium	0.28***	(0.04)	0.27***	(0.04)	0.41***	(0.04)	0.41***	(0.04)
High	0.28***	(0.04)	0.27***	(0.04)	0.45***	(0.04)	0.45***	(0.04)
Age	0.003*	(0.00)	0.003*	(0.00)	-0.004**	(0.00)	-0.004**	(0.00)
Race: European (ref.)								
Hispanic	-0.06	(0.08)	-0.07	(0.08)	-0.06	(0.08)	-0.06	(0.08)
Arabic	-0.41***	(0.10)	-0.41***	(0.10)	-0.31**	(0.10)	-0.31**	(0.10)
Asian	-0.57***	(0.09)	-0.57***	(0.09)	-0.72***	(0.09)	-0.72***	(0.09)
African	-0.20	(0.10)	-0.20	(0.11)	-0.34***	(0.10)	-0.35***	(0.10)
Other	-0.22**	(0.07)	-0.22***	(0.06)	-0.35***	(0.07)	-0.35***	(0.06)
Religion: Christian (ref.)								
Muslim	-0.30***	(0.08)	-0.30***	(0.09)	-0.32***	(0.09)	-0.32***	(0.09)
Buddhist	-0.36**	(0.12)	-0.35**	(0.12)	-0.27*	(0.12)	-0.27*	(0.12)
Atheist	-0.08*	(0.04)	-0.08	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.04)	-0.05	(0.04)
Non-religious believer	0.13**	(0.04)	0.13**	(0.04)	0.18***	(0.04)	0.18***	(0.04)
Other	-0.21***	(0.06)	-0.21***	(0.06)	-0.29***	(0.06)	-0.30***	(0.06)
Membership: Non-premium (ref.)								
Premium	1.26***	(0.13)	1.27***	(0.13)	0.83***	(0.11)	0.84***	(0.11)
<i>Random Effects</i>								
Regional-level variance	.02	(0.01)	.02	(0.01)	.16***	(0.04)	.16***	(0.04)
Bayesian DIC	27365.52		27351.85		27415.7		27411.59	

Notes: b = coefficient (log odds); SE = standard error; ref. = reference category.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The addition of an interaction of resident children by gender in Model 2 proved to be non-significant, indicating a more robust association between relationship preferences and presence of children across gender categories. We also tested for cumulative effects of union

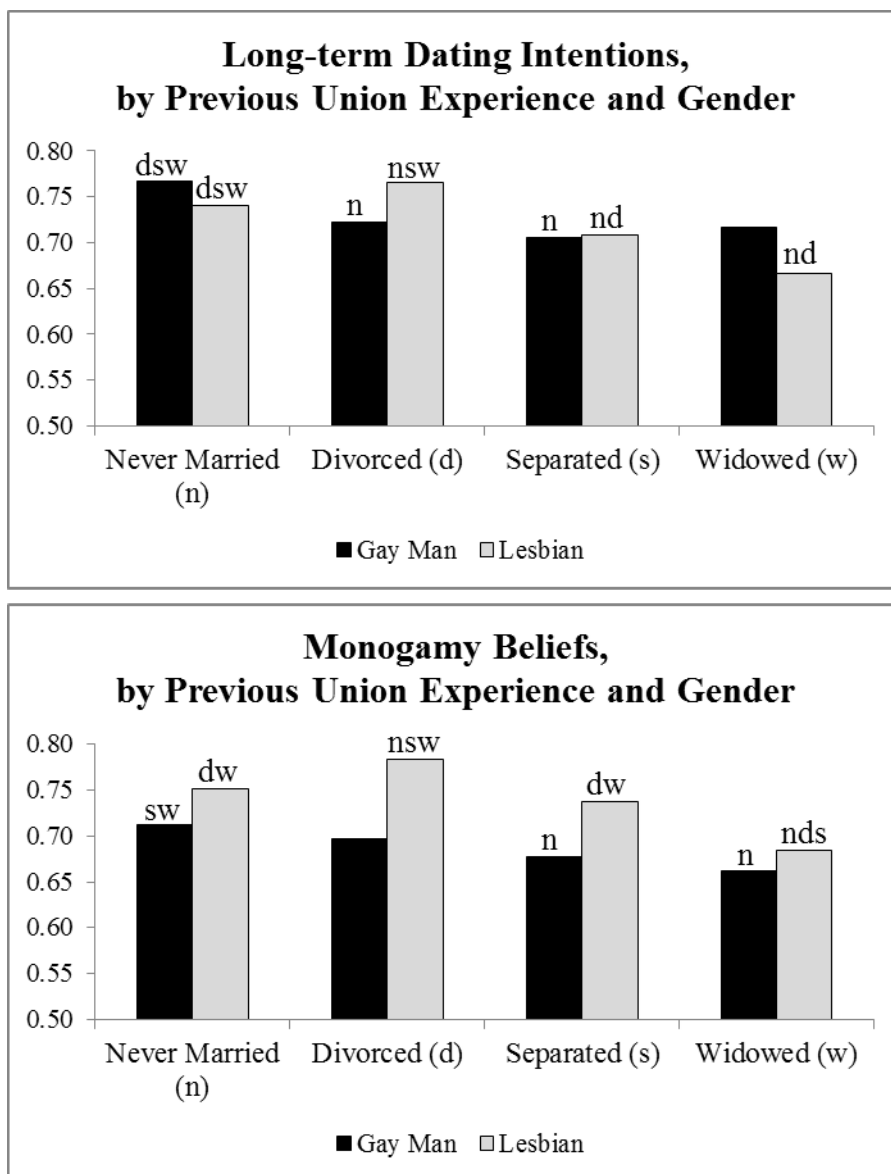


Figure 3.1. Predicted probabilities of long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs, by previous union experience and gender

Notes: Based on multilevel logistic regression models with significant interactions of previous union experience and gender (see Table 4), controlling for resident children, education, age, race, religion, and type of membership.

Letters indicate the following: n - significantly different from the never married at $p < .05$; d - significantly different from the divorced at $p < .05$; s - significantly different from the separated at $p < .05$; w - significantly different from the widowed at $p < .05$.

experience and resident children on long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs. Additional analyses (available upon request) including interaction terms of previous union experience and presence of resident children show that the two factors operate independently.

We now turn to the findings related to contextual factors. Table 3.5 reports the estimated associations between daters' relationship preferences and attitudes towards same-

sex couples, as well as legal recognition of same-sex unions. The fourth hypothesis suggested that more positive attitudes towards same-sex couples in a region would be related to stronger long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs among gay men and lesbians. The data entirely support this expectation. Across all models, results indicate that the more favorable the attitude towards same-sex couples, the more likely gay men and lesbian daters are to prefer long-term dating and to value monogamy. The inclusion of gender interactions in Model 5 is non-significant, suggesting that there are no major differences between gay men and lesbians when it comes to the association between relationship preferences and normative climate towards same-sex partnering.

The final hypothesis proposed that the legal context of same-sex partnerships would also be linked to gay men and lesbians' dating intentions and monogamy beliefs. More precisely, we argued that gay men and lesbian women living in countries that legally recognize same-sex unions would have stronger long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs, compared to those living in countries that do not recognize same-sex unions. The data again provides almost full support to the hypothesis. Results in the left panel of Table 3.5 show that the legal recognition of same-sex unions (as either registered partnerships and/ or marital unions) is related to a significant increase in the intention to start a long-term relationship. The right panel also indicates a positive association between monogamy beliefs and legal recognition of same-sex marriage. Interactions with gender in Model 6 are non-significant, showing that the connection between relationship preferences and formal acceptance towards same-sex unions is also consistent across gender categories.

Finally, to make inferences about which contextual predictor had a more substantial link to gay men and lesbians' relationship preferences, despite the inability of estimating them within the same model (as described previously), we can nonetheless draw on goodness of fit comparisons. Whereas for long-term dating intentions, the model including legal recognition of same-sex unions displays a smaller DIC value, for monogamy beliefs, a slightly better fitting model is the one including attitudes towards same-sex couples. Effect sizes (e.g., the effect of legal recognition is more prominent for long-term dating intentions than for monogamy beliefs; the effect of social acceptance for monogamy beliefs is twice as strong as for long-term dating intentions) also lead us to conclude that legal recognition of same-sex unions is more strongly associated with daters' long-term plans, whereas social tolerance is a better predictor of gay men and lesbians' monogamy beliefs.

88 **TABLE 3.5.** Multilevel Logistic Regression Results Predicting Long-term Dating Intentions and Monogamy Belief, by Contextual Level Characteristics ($N = 24,598$, 53 Regions)

			Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
			b	(SE)	b	(SE)	b	(SE)	b	(SE)
Long-term dating intentions	<i>Fixed effects</i>	Gender: Gay man (ref.)								
		Lesbian	-0.08**	(0.03)	-0.08**	(0.03)	-0.08**	(0.03)	-0.16	(0.25)
		Attitudes	0.20**	(0.06)			0.29***	(0.07)		
		Legal recognition: No recognition (ref.)								
		Registered partnership			0.80***	(0.13)			0.76***	(0.18)
		Marriage			0.88***	(0.13)			0.90***	(0.19)
	<i>Cross-level interactions</i>	Attitudes \times gender					-0.11	(0.08)		
	Legal recognition \times gender									
	Registered partnership							0.13	(0.25)	
	Marriage							-0.01	(0.25)	
<i>Random effect</i>	Regional-level variance	.01	(0.01)	.00	(0.00)	.01	(0.01)	.00	(0.00)	
	Bayesian DIC	27361.92		27357.51		27333.40		27332.38		
Monogamy beliefs	<i>Fixed effects</i>	Gender: Gay man (ref.)								
		Lesbian	0.25***	(0.03)	0.25***	(0.03)	0.25***	(0.03)	0.02	(0.20)
		Attitudes	0.43***	(0.12)			0.48***	(0.12)		
		Legal recognition: No recognition (ref.)								
		Registered partnership			0.36*	(0.15)			0.17	(0.16)
		Marriage			0.81***	(0.17)			0.66***	(0.19)
	<i>Cross-level interactions</i>	Attitudes \times gender					-0.03	(0.08)		
	Legal recognition \times gender									
	Registered partnership							0.25	(0.20)	
	Marriage							0.21	(0.20)	
<i>Random effect</i>	Regional-level variance	.10***	(0.03)	.08***	(0.02)	.10***	(0.03)	.08***	(0.02)	
	Bayesian DIC	27411.31		27412.84		27411.68		27413.36		

Notes: b = coefficient (log odds); SE = standard error; ref. = reference category.

Models include controls for all individual-level factors as in previous models, as well as regional-level website composition measures. Although coefficients for the individual-level variables are not presented, they are consistent with the results in Table 4. The only significant factors indicating website composition are the aggregated proportion of highly educated online daters within a region (ranging from 0.11 to 0.53) and the regional mean age (ranging 32.06 from 41.67).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

3.5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study expands research on gay men and lesbian women's relationship intentions and values by drawing on unique data from Internet daters' preference profiles. The handful of earlier studies examining the partnering behavior of sexual minorities have mainly relied on small-scale convenience samples or focused on a single geographical context. Looking at a real-life dating environment, this study analyses the long-term dating intentions and monogamy beliefs of gay men and lesbians across 53 regions in eight European countries. We also extended existing research by examining the influence of individual factors but also contextual determinants. In line with theoretical expectations and previous empirical studies, we find that compared to gay men, lesbians hold a stronger belief in the importance of monogamy. We also demonstrated that among the never married, lesbians have less long-term dating intentions compared to gay men. Results are in line with previous research showing that lesbians are less likely to enter registered partnerships (Andersson *et al.* 2006) and suggest that, when no marital history or ties to previous partnerships are present, lesbians perceive fewer benefits and have less interest in long-term commitments than gay men.

Our results further confirm that separation and widowhood among gay men and lesbians are linked with the least demanding partnering standards (Brines & Joyner 1999; Carr 2004). We also unravel differences between gay and lesbian daters in relation to divorce. Similar to heterosexual divorcees' re-partnering patterns, the experience of marital dissolution has different implications for women than for men (Holden & Smock 1991; Sweeney 1997). Whereas for divorced gay men, marital history is connected with lower long-term dating intentions, divorced lesbians display more stringent partnering demands (Gelissen 2004) by preferring long-term arrangements and also placing more emphasis on sexual exclusivity. This finding could be related to the more economically vulnerable position that divorced women generally hold in the partnership market (e.g., Sweeney 1997) and a thus greater urgency to re-enter a formalized union compared to divorced men.

The presence of children also presents a strong association with gay men and lesbians' relationship preferences. Having at least two resident children is connected to both lower interest in long-term dating and weaker monogamy beliefs. This reveals a self-evaluation of parenthood as a constraint on the partnership market, particularly as the number of children

increases. The lack of gender differences illustrates that the “child burden” effect (Jansen, Mortelmans, & Snoeckx 2009, p. 1285) is valid for both gay men and lesbians.

Furthermore, our findings support previous research, which has shown that mating strategies, as well as monogamy attitudes are subject to contextual influences (Buss & Schmitt 1993; Schmitt 2005). First, the normative climate towards same-sex couples was highly related to daters’ relationship preferences. Residing in a supportive environment was associated with an increase in long-term dating intentions and in the value attached to sexual exclusivity for both gay men and lesbians. The level of formal tolerance towards same-sex couples has an even stronger link to gays and lesbians’ long-term plans and monogamy beliefs, particularly in countries where same-sex marriage is legalized (e.g., the Netherlands, Sweden). The official recognition of same-sex partnerships indeed allows a longer horizon for pursuing long-term and monogamous relationships for both sexual minority groups (Lau 2012). Additional analyses, available upon request, also show that the difference in dating intentions and monogamy beliefs between heterosexual online daters and those with a same-sex orientation is lower in countries that legalize same-sex partnerships. Therefore, in contexts that legally recognize same-sex unions, gay men and lesbians have similar partnering values and priorities as heterosexuals.

The findings of this study have deep implications in support of bringing same-sex partnerships from “outlaw to in-law” (Rydström 2004, p. 175) in both normative and institutional terms. The prospect of being able to have a socially and legally accepted union, particularly a marital contract, provides gay men and lesbians the instruments to better define their partner roles (Powell *et al.* 2010). It also ensures the security to envision a sexually committed relationship where relationship-specific investments can also be made. Moreover, this study questions the validity of previous hypotheses suggesting that gay men’s preference for casual sex with multiple partners is related to their inherent inability to fulfill typical masculine gender roles and the subsequent desire to reassert their masculinity (Rhodes *et al.* 2007). Our findings show that in contexts where same-sex marriage is legally recognized, gay men distance themselves from the stereotypical image of only being prone to short-term and sexually uncommitted relationships.

In addition to providing novel insights into gay men and lesbians’ dating strategies and monogamy beliefs, this study has several limitations. First, we were constrained to only being able to derive individuals’ same-sex orientation from whether they searched for a same-sex partner online, instead of relying on self-identified measures of sexual identity. Second, the

user profile data we used in the analyses did not include information regarding the exact previous union trajectories of gay and lesbian online daters. Furthermore, we could not make distinctions between types of resident children (e.g., biological, adopted, pertaining to a previous different-sex or same-sex union).

Given the lack of studies using European large-scale comparative data on these rather marginalized groups, the current research represents a significant leap. Despite these limitations, the current study presents innovative results and draws a comprehensive picture of both individual and contextual level determinants in the primary phase of the mate selection process of gay and lesbian daters. Future studies could extend this research by employing more refined measures of dating intentions and attitudes towards monogamy that could address more than one dimension of intentional commitment and relationship values (Rhoades *et al.* 2010). An additional avenue for research would be a longitudinal examination of whether dating preferences and beliefs evolve on the basis of experience on the website. Moreover, other contextual aspects such as overall religiosity or economic development could be examined at the regional level. Finally, future work might also take on a two-sided perspective on gay men and lesbians' online dating by focusing on the actual contacting behavior and matching between members.

