

## Playing the field or locking down a partner?: Perceptions of available romantic partners and commitment readiness

By: [Ashlyn Brady](#), [Levi Baker](#), Christopher R. Agnew, Benjamin W. Hadden

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### **Abstract:**

People often consider how ready they feel for a committed romantic relationship before initiating one. Although research has only begun to identify the antecedents of commitment readiness, several theoretical perspectives suggest that it should be shaped by the perceived frequency of available partners. We conducted five studies (one correlational, four experimental) that tested this idea among single people. A Pilot Study assessed participants' perceptions of available romantic partners and their commitment readiness. In the subsequent four experiments, participants read articles (Studies 1a and 1b) or created dating profiles and were presented with false feedback (Studies 2 and 3) that influenced perceptions of available partners and reported their commitment readiness. Results suggested that people were less ready to commit to a romantic relationship to the extent that they perceived they had many partners available to them. These results further understanding of factors that promote the decision to initiate a committed relationship.

**Keywords:** commitment readiness | relationship initiation | romantic relationships | available partners | commitment

### **Article:**

How do people know when they are ready to enter into a committed romantic relationship? Although considerable research has investigated why people become romantically attracted to others (for review, see Feingold, 1990; Orbuch & Sprecher, 2003) and what motivates people to maintain established relationships (for review, see Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010; Agnew & VanderDrift, 2018; Tran, Judge, & Kashima, 2019), relatively little research has investigated the process of relationship initiation (see Campbell & Stanton, 2014; Eastwick, Finkel, & Simpson, 2019). Recent research has revealed, however, that feelings of readiness to enter into a committed relationship—i.e., commitment readiness—may play an important role. Specifically, people who are single frequently evaluate the extent to which they feel ready to commit to a romantic relationship (Agnew, Hadden, & Tan, 2019; Hadden, Agnew, & Tan, 2018), and such evaluations not only shape the decision to enter into a relationship (Hadden et al., 2018) but also promote relationship maintenance behaviors after those relationships are established (Agnew et al., 2019).

Despite the importance of commitment readiness for relationship initiation, research has only begun to identify what causes people to believe that they are ready to commit to a romantic relationship (Agnew, Hadden, & Tan, 2020). Extant theory and research suggest that the perceived availability of potential partners—conceptualized here as the perceived quantity of people who could potentially serve as relationship partners—may influence commitment readiness. However, such perspectives can be used to make competing predictions regarding the direction of this influence. On the one hand, given that humans likely evolved to secure the most desirable partner possible (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), and given that people who perceive many potential partners should benefit from being more selective to ensure they select a maximally desirable partner, perceiving many available potential partners may decrease readiness to enter into a committed relationship. On the other hand, given that it is threatening to acknowledge a dearth of romantic interest from others (Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993), and people are motivated to view themselves in a favorable manner (Leary, 2007; Shrauger, 1975), perceiving few potential partners may motivate people to defensively decide that they are not ready for a committed relationship and thus instead decrease commitment readiness. The goal of the current research was to test these competing predictions.

## **1. An overview of commitment readiness**

As previously discussed, relatively little research has investigated the process of relationship initiation (see Campbell & Stanton, 2014; Eastwick et al., 2019) and research has only begun to examine how people decide to begin a committed romantic relationship (see, for example, Joel & MacDonald, 2021). Relationship receptivity theory (RRT), however, highlights the importance of perceived timing when initiating a committed relationship (Agnew, 2014; Agnew et al., 2019). Specifically, RRT posits that people can be more or less receptive to a romantic relationship at any given time, and that such receptivity has important implications for relationship initiation and stability. For example, people may not feel ready for, and thus not seek, a committed romantic relationship if they are focusing on their career, planning to move across the country, or perhaps just ended a serious relationship. To this end, a person's feelings of readiness to enter into a committed relationship—i.e., commitment readiness—is an important component of relationship receptivity that reflects the perceived timing of relationship initiation (Agnew et al., 2019; Hadden et al., 2018).

Unlike other factors that may inform receptivity to committed relationships (e.g., attachment, fear of being single; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Spielmann et al., 2013), commitment readiness captures a state of relationship receptivity that fluctuates in response to perceived readiness for and timing of a committed relationship. Importantly, recent research has revealed that commitment readiness plays an important role in relationship initiation. Specifically, people who are single frequently evaluate the extent to which they feel ready to commit to a romantic relationship (Agnew et al., 2019; Hadden et al., 2018), and such feelings of commitment readiness are associated with experiencing more relationship-focused cognitions and relationship pursuit behaviors (Hadden et al., 2018). For instance, when people feel more ready for a committed relationship, they express more positive views about relationship closeness and are more likely to enter into a committed relationship (Hadden et al., 2018). Furthermore, after establishing a relationship, commitment readiness also promotes relationship maintenance behaviors (e.g., self-disclosure) and stability (Agnew et al., 2019). Although commitment readiness is an important contributor to relationship initiation and stability, limited research has sought to identify what

causes people to believe that they are or are not ready to commit to a romantic relationship (Agnew et al., 2020).

## **2. Perceiving many potential partners may decrease commitment readiness**

As noted, there are reasons to expect that perceiving many available partners may decrease commitment readiness. In particular, humans likely evolved to pursue and secure the most desirable partner possible (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Further, given that norms of monogamy discourage pursuing multiple partners (Schmookler & Bursik, 2007), it would be adaptive for people with numerous potential partners to adopt a cautious approach when considering potential partners because a cautious approach would decrease the likelihood of inadvertently committing to a less than optimal partner. In contrast, given that people with fewer available partners have fewer opportunities to secure a partner, not pursuing an available partner greatly increases the risk that people with few available partners ultimately end up unpartnered and fail to reap the benefits of a committed romantic relationship (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Feeney & Collins, 2014; Fitzsimons, Finkel, & Vandellen, 2015). Together, these literatures suggest that people should be less ready to commit to a romantic relationship to the extent that they perceive they have many available partners.

Theory and research also provide indirect evidence for the idea that perceiving many available partners decreases commitment readiness. For instance, theoretical perspectives (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Sprecher, 1998) and supporting research (Jemmott III, Ashby, & Lindenfeld, 1989; Pennebaker et al., 1979; Stone, Shackelford, & Buss, 2007; Uecker & Regnerus, 2010) on sex ratios suggest that people who are heterosexual become less selective when there are more people of their own sex compared to the other sex and thus have fewer romantic opportunities, and become more selective when their sex is in the minority and thus have greater romantic opportunities. Similarly, economic theories (Lynn, 1991; Rosato, 2016; Schwartz & Ward, 2004) and supporting research (Haynes, 2009; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000) on scarcity suggest that people tend to desire scarce or limited options more than highly available options, and often struggle to select an option when choices are too plentiful. Finally, theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) and research (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Miller, 1997) on interdependence suggest that people in established relationships become less committed to their partners to the extent that they perceive there are more desirable alternative partners. Although these bodies of research are broadly consistent with our predictions, research has yet to directly test the idea that idiosyncratic perceptions of available partners affect singles' readiness to initiate a committed relationship.

## **3. Perceiving few potential partners may decrease commitment readiness**

Yet there are also reasons to expect that perceiving few potential partners may instead decrease commitment readiness. In particular, people are generally motivated to view themselves in a favorable manner (Leary, 2007; Shrauger, 1975), and acknowledging a lack of romantic interest from others can threaten self-worth (Brase & Guy, 2004). To protect their self-worth, people who perceive they have few romantic opportunities may dismiss or minimize such threatening information by deciding that they are not ready for a relationship rather than acknowledging their limited opportunities or risking potential rejection by pursuing someone who is uninterested in starting a relationship. In contrast, perceiving numerous partners should bolster self-worth and thus

may reduce the need to defensively protect the self by deciding to be unready for a relationship. Together, this suggests that people should be less ready to commit to a romantic relationship to the extent that they perceive they have few available partners.

Several theoretical perspectives and lines of research support the idea that perceiving few available partners decreases commitment readiness. For example, theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) and research on belonging and attraction suggest that perceiving few romantic opportunities (Brase & Guy, 2004; Brooks, Russo-Batterham, & Blake, 2022) and little romantic interest from others (Bale, 2013; Penke & Denissen, 2008) tends to decrease self-esteem and thus can be highly distressing. Further, those who believe that they have few, compared to numerous, romantic opportunities anticipate greater rejection by potential romantic partners (Cameron, Stinson, Gaetz, & Balchen, 2010; Dandeneau & Baldwin, 2004) and tend to be more distressed by such rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Ford & Collins, 2010), and this fear of rejection tends to motivate people to avoid forming relationships and promoting intimacy (Baker & McNulty, 2013; Cameron, Stinson, & Wood, 2013; Ford & Collins, 2010). Further, theory (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Leary, 2007; Sherman & Cohen, 2006) and research (Kim & Harmon, 2014; Wombacher, Matig, Sheff, & Scott, 2019) on self-enhancement and rationalization suggest that it is common for people to dismiss or reinterpret threatening information (e.g., a lack of romantic interest from others) in a manner that allows them to maintain self-worth, suggesting that people with few romantic opportunities may attribute their lack of relationship to being unready for one (vs. unable to form one). Nevertheless, as previously noted, research has yet to examine whether perceiving little romantic interest motivates people to decide that they are not ready for a committed relationship.

#### **4. Hypotheses and overview of the current research**

Given that readiness to enter into a committed relationship increases the likelihood of initiating and maintaining such a relationship (Agnew et al., 2019; Hadden et al., 2018), there is a critical need to identify factors that shape feelings of readiness. We predicted that perceptions of potential available partners would be associated with readiness to enter into a committed romantic relationship; however, we did not make predictions about the direction of this association initially because extant theory and research suggest competing predictions. We conducted five studies to address this research question. First, we conducted a Pilot Study that assessed single participants' perceptions of available romantic partners and their commitment readiness. Next, we conducted four experiments in which single participants read articles (Studies 1a and 1b) or created dating profiles and were presented with false feedback (Studies 2 and 3) that influenced their perceptions of available partners and reported their commitment readiness. All manipulations, exclusions, and measures are reported in this manuscript and Online Supplemental Materials (OSM).

#### **5. Pilot study**

##### **5.1. Method**

###### **5.1.1. Participants**

Six-hundred and ninety-two undergraduate students were recruited from a Midwestern university. Given that the goal of the study was to address readiness to enter into a committed relationship,

331 participants were excluded because they indicated that they were currently involved in a romantic relationship, leaving a final sample of 361 participants (179 male, 178 female, 4 other; Mage = 18.96, SDage = 1.16). A majority of participants (n = 230; 63.7%) identified as White, 20.5% as Asian, 5% as Hispanic, 5% as two or more ethnicities, 3.3% as African-American, and 2.5% as unknown or preferred not to answer.

### **5.1.2. Procedure**

After providing informed consent, participants completed all measures using Qualtrics survey software. Participants were debriefed and given course credit after completing the study.

### **5.1.3. Measures**

#### **5.1.3.1. Commitment readiness**

Participants completed the Commitment Readiness Scale (Agnew et al., 2019) to assess their readiness to commit to a romantic relationship. This measure requires people to report the extent to which they agree with eight items (e.g., “I feel ready to be involved in a committed relationship”) using a 9-point Likert scale from 0 (completely disagree) to 8 (completely agree). Appropriate items were reverse coded and all items were summed (M = 37.95; SD = 14.95). Internal consistency was good ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

#### **5.1.3.2. Expected available partners**

Participants completed an assessment of expected available romantic partners. Although our predictions address the implications of perceived current, rather than expected, potential partners, expected interpersonal experiences are often shaped by current experiences (Baker, McNulty, & VanderDrift, 2017) and such expectations influence interpersonal decisions (Baker, Cobb, McNulty, Lambert, & Fincham, 2016; Baker, McNulty, Brady, & Montalvo, 2020). This measure requires people to report the extent to which they agree with seven items (e.g., “I will have limited options for committed partners in the future”) using a 9-point Likert scale from 0 (completely disagree) to 8 (completely agree). Appropriate items were reverse coded and all items were summed (M = 32.04; SD = 11.06). Higher scores indicate that participants expected to have more potential partners. Internal consistency was good ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

## **5.2. Results**

Preliminary analyses revealed that men and women did not differ in their reports of commitment readiness,  $t(355) = 0.27$ ,  $p = .790$ ,  $d = 0.03$ . However, men reported expecting significantly fewer available partners compared to women,  $t(355) = -2.36$ ,  $p = .019$ ,  $d = -0.25$ . Consistent with predictions, perceived availability of romantic partners was associated with commitment readiness. Specifically, consistent with the possibility that perceiving many potential partners decreases readiness to commit to a romantic relationship, perceived partners were negatively associated with commitment readiness,  $r = -0.34$ ,  $p < .001$ . Further, supplemental analyses indicated that perceived romantic partners remained negatively associated with commitment readiness after controlling for gender,  $B = -0.40$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(356) = -6.64$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### **5.3. Discussion**

The Pilot Study provided initial evidence that perceptions of available potential partners are associated with feelings of commitment readiness. It also clarified the direction of this association by revealing that people were less ready to commit to a romantic relationship to the extent that they perceived more potential romantic partners. The findings from this study are nevertheless limited due to its cross-sectional nature, precluding conclusions about the causal nature of the association. Studies 1a, 1b, 2, and 3 were designed to identify the possible causal implications of perceived available partners for commitment readiness.

## **6. Studies 1a and 1b**

Study 1a was an experiment designed to provide causal evidence that perceptions of available romantic partners influence feelings of readiness to commit to a romantic relationship. Study 1b was a replication of Study 1a that included stronger manipulation checks and a larger sample. In both studies, participants read articles that led them to believe that they had either many or few romantic partners available to them. Next, participants reported their commitment readiness. Given that perceived available partners were negatively associated with commitment readiness in the Pilot Study, we amended our initial prediction to specify the direction of the association. Specifically, we predicted that commitment readiness would be lower among participants who were led to believe that they had many available romantic partners compared to participants who were led to believe that they had few available romantic partners.

### **6.1. Method**

#### **6.1.1. Participants**

Participants were recruited from the Mechanical Turk (MTurk) service on Amazon.com. An a priori power analysis based on the effect size from the Pilot Study ( $d = 0.72$ ) indicated that 54 people were necessary to achieve power greater than 0.80. Nevertheless, given that it is difficult to predict the effect size of an experimental manipulation from cross-sectional self-reports (Bosco, Aquinis, Singh, Field, & Pierce, 2015), we made an a priori decision to increase our sample size to 200 participants for Study 1a, yet only obtained 114 usable participants (63 male, 51 female;  $M_{age} = 34.18$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11.62$ ) due to recruiting difficulties. In particular, Study 1a was conducted during a period when it had become clear that not all MTurk respondents were human and/or serious respondents (see Ahler, Roush, & Sood, 2019). Accordingly, 575 of the 784 recruited participants were excluded for failing attention checks and/or not following instructions (see OSM for more details). Furthermore, given that the goal of the study was to address how perceptions of available romantic partners influences people's decision to pursue a committed relationship, 95 participants were deemed ineligible prior to completing the study for indicating that they were already in a highly committed relationship. Although it stated in the preregistration that data collection would continue until a sample size of 200 participants was obtained, we decided to stop data collection prior to collecting 200 usable participants due to the abnormally high rate of non-human and non-serious respondents. Because of these recruiting difficulties, we conducted Study 1b using stricter recruitment criteria (e.g., greater approval rate for previous studies). An a priori

power analysis that anticipated smaller effect sizes ( $d = 0.30$ ) than what was obtained in Study 1a ( $d = 0.42$ ) indicated that 352 people were necessary to achieve power greater than 0.80. Thus, we recruited 393 single participants in Study 1b, 41 of whom were excluded for failing attention checks and/or not following instructions (see OSM for more details), leaving a total of 352 participants (184 cis female, 164 cis male, 1 trans male, 1 trans female, 2 other;  $M_{\text{age}} = 43.69$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.50$ ).

In Study 1a and Study 1b, a majority of participants (71.9% and 75.6%, respectively) identified as Caucasian, 9.6% and 13.6% as African-American, 7.9% and 2.8% as Hispanic, 4.4% and 6.0% as Asian, and 6.1% and 2.0% as a different ethnicity or two or more ethnicities. Similarly, a majority of participants (91.2%, 84.4%) identified as heterosexual, 6.1% and 8.2% identified as bisexual, and 2.6% and 5.4% identified as gay or lesbian.

### **6.1.2. Procedure**

Participants completed all procedures online using Qualtrics survey software. After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions to complete a reading task. For this task, all participants were instructed to carefully read two articles, and were given filler questions after each article that served as attention checks (see OSM for more details). The first article was a filler article intended to disguise the true purpose of the study; the second article was intended to manipulate participants' perception of available romantic partners. The second article read by participants in the few partners condition was written to lead them to believe that there are not as many potential romantic partners available as they may think (e.g., "Recent research revealed that people have a much harder time finding romantic partners than they may think; thus, while people may believe there are plenty of fish in the sea, they tend to be wrong"). Participants in the many partners condition read a different article intended to lead them to believe that there are more potential romantic partners available than they may think (e.g., "Recent research revealed that people have a much easier time finding romantic partners than they may think; thus, while people may believe there are barely any fish in the sea, they tend to be wrong").

Given that the effectiveness of these manipulations had yet to be established, all participants were instructed to complete a second task intended to similarly influence perceptions of available partners to further reinforce the likelihood that such perceptions were manipulated. Prior research on cognitive ease (Schwarz et al., 1991; Tan & Agnew, 2016) has revealed that people are more confident in judgments when they can easily provide evidence for that judgment. Thus, given that it is likely difficult to think of numerous potential partners, participants in the few partners condition were asked to provide the initials of seven people with whom they could begin a romantic relationship to further their perception that there are actually few potential romantic partners available. In contrast, given that it is likely easy to think of few potential partners, participants in the many partners condition were asked to provide the initials of one person with whom they could begin a romantic relationship to further their perception that they have potential romantic partners available. After completing both tasks, participants completed manipulation checks and reported their commitment readiness. Participants were debriefed and paid \$0.50 in Study 1a and \$1.00 in Study 1b for completing the study. All procedures were registered before data collection.

### **6.1.3. Measures**

#### **6.1.3.1. Commitment readiness**

Participants completed the same Commitment Readiness Scale described in the Pilot Study ( $M = 29.62$ ;  $SD = 17.78$ ;  $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

#### **6.1.3.2. Manipulation checks**

In Study 1a, participants reported the ease of perceiving potential partners with a single item (“How easy or difficult was it to generate one person [seven people] who you would be interested in starting a relationship with?”), using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = extremely difficult, 7 = extremely easy). However, given that this manipulation check did not directly address participants' perceived available partners, participants in Study 1b responded to three items that assessed their perceptions of available partners (e.g., “I currently have many attractive dating options available to me”), using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = extremely difficult, 7 = extremely easy). These three items were summed; internal consistency was good ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ). To establish the construct validity of the manipulation, participants in Study 1b also responded to seven other alternative items to ensure that the manipulation had minor or inconsequential effects on other related constructs (see Lasko & Chester, 2020), such as the frequency of single individuals that live in close geographical proximity, the desire to find a partner, their perceived mate value, the size of their social network, and previous dating success.

## **6.2. Results**

Preliminary analyses indicated that men and women in Study 1a did not differ in their reports of commitment readiness,  $t(112) = 0.19$ ,  $p = .852$ ,  $d = 0.04$ . However, in Study 1b, men ( $M = 41.50$ ,  $SD = 15.27$ ) were more ready for a committed relationship than were women ( $M = 37.58$ ,  $SD = 16.94$ ),  $t(350) = 2.26$ ,  $p = .024$ ,  $d = 0.24$ . Supplemental analyses addressing the association between commitment readiness and various relationship outcomes (e.g., relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment) among participants in Study 1a can be found in the OSM.

### **6.2.1. Was the manipulation successful?**

Confirming the effectiveness of the manipulation in Study 1a, participants in the many partners condition ( $M = 5.02$ ;  $SD = 1.85$ ) reported it easier to perceive potential partners compared to participants in the few partners condition ( $M = 2.27$ ;  $SD = 1.67$ ),  $t(112) = -8.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -1.55$ . Similarly, in Study 1b, participants in the many partners condition ( $M = 12.31$ ;  $SD = 4.91$ ) reported perceiving more potential partners than did participants in the few partners condition ( $M = 10.31$ ;  $SD = 5.48$ ),  $t(350) = 3.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.39$ . In Study 1b, participants in the many partners condition did not differ from participants in the few partners condition in regard to the majority of the alternative manipulation checks, specifically, their perceptions of the amount of single people who live near them,  $t(350) = 1.40$ ,  $p = .163$ ,  $d = 0.15$ , enjoyment from interacting with others,  $t(350) = -0.91$ ,  $p = .928$ ,  $d = -0.01$ , perceived mate value,  $t(350) = 1.27$ ,  $p = .206$ ,  $d = 0.14$ , ease finding potential partners,  $t(350) = 1.56$ ,  $p = .119$ ,  $d = 0.17$ , social network size,  $t(350) = 0.22$ ,  $p = .829$ ,  $d = 0.02$ , or previous dating success,  $t(350) = 1.25$ ,  $p = .212$ ,  $d = 0.13$ . However, participants



in the many partners condition reported believing that others have more dating options than did participants in the few partners condition,  $t(350) = 2.55$ ,  $p = .011$ ,  $d = 0.27$ , which is likely the result of the target article discussing dating options generally and not addressing the participant's own dating options specifically.

### **6.2.2. Did perceived partners affect commitment readiness?**

Providing causal evidence that perceiving many available romantic partners decreases commitment readiness, those in the many partners condition (Study 1a:  $M = 26.32$ ;  $SD = 15.57$ ; Study 1b:  $M = 36.11$ ;  $SD = 15.82$ ) reported that they were significantly less ready to enter into a committed relationship than did those in the few partners condition (Study 1a:  $M = 33.71$ ;  $SD = 19.58$ ; Study 1b:  $M = 42.69$ ;  $SD = 16.17$ ), Study 1a:  $t(112) = -2.25$ ,  $p = .027$ ,  $d = -0.42$ , 95% CI  $[-13.91, -0.87]$ , Study 1b:  $t(350) = -3.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -0.41$ , 95% CI  $[-9.93, -3.22]$ .

Given that Study 1b revealed (a) a gender difference in commitment readiness and (b) that the manipulation also affected one of the alternative manipulation checks (i.e., others' dating options), we conducted supplemental analyses that controlled for both variables to ensure that they did not account for the obtained results. First, after controlling for participants' gender, participants in the many partners condition reported that they were significantly less ready to enter into a committed relationship than did those in the few partners condition,  $F(1, 349) = 15.78$ ,  $p < .001$ . Second, after controlling for others' dating options, participants in the many partners condition reported that they were significantly less ready to enter into a committed relationship than did those in the few partners condition,  $F(1, 349) = 22.25$ ,  $p < .001$ . Further, this difference remained significant after controlling for all seven alternative manipulation checks,  $F(1, 343) = 23.91$ ,  $p < .001$ , suggesting that the effect of the manipulation on commitment readiness emerged due to changes in participants' perceived available partners, not other related constructs (e.g., perceived mate value, previous dating success).

## **6.3. Discussion**

Studies 1a and 1b provide causal evidence that perceived available partners shape one's readiness to enter into a committed relationship. Specifically, participants who were led to believe that there were many available romantic partners reported being less ready to enter into a committed relationship compared to participants who were led to believe that there were few available romantic partners. Nevertheless, these studies are limited in two ways. First, the manipulation in these studies involved reading articles about others' available partners and recalling potential partners and thus did not directly manipulate participants' perceptions of their available romantic partners. Although the manipulation checks indicated that the manipulations indirectly manipulate participants' perceptions of their available romantic partners, one goal of Study 2 was to do so directly. Second, the manipulations used in Studies 1a and 1b may differ from the manner in which people typically are informed about available romantic partners. Thus, the goal of Study 2 was to provide a more ecologically-valid test of our predictions.

## **7. Study 2**

Participants in Study 2 were provided with direct feedback indicating that either many or few people were romantically interested in them. More specifically, participants created a profile for a

dating website and were provided false feedback on their profile that either enhanced or diminished their perception of available romantic partners. Then, participants reported their commitment readiness. Based on the results from the previous studies, we predicted that commitment readiness would be lower among participants who ostensibly received interest from many, compared to few, people on their dating profiles.

## **7.1. Method**

### **7.1.1. Participants**

Participants were 108 undergraduate students who were recruited from a university in the southeastern United States. Participants were eligible to participate if they were single and were not currently using any online dating services because we did not want previous feedback from online dating services to override the feedback they would receive during the study. An a priori power analysis based on a pilot study that used a similar manipulation ( $d = 0.61$ ) revealed that the power to detect an association between commitment readiness and perception of available partners would be greater than 0.80 with a sample of at least 88 participants. Consistent with the preregistration, after collecting 88 participants, data collection continued until the end of the semester to maximize power. However, given that participants were required to attend two separate sessions to complete the study, 20 participants were excluded for not attending both sessions. One participant was excluded for not following directions, leaving a total of 87 participants (64 cis female, 21 cis male, 1 trans male, 1 unidentified;  $M_{age} = 19.26$  years,  $SD_{age} = 2.02$  years). A majority of participants (50.6%) identified as African-American, 26.4% as Caucasian, 9.2% as Hispanic, 6.9% as Asian, and 6.8% as a different ethnicity or two or more ethnicities. A majority of participants (83.9%) identified as heterosexual, 10.3% identified as bisexual, 4.6% identified as gay or lesbian, and 1.1% as other.

### **7.1.2. Procedure**

Participants were recruited via an online sign-up system and completed the study in a laboratory setting. After providing informed consent, participants completed a questionnaire assessing the extent to which they believe others are interested in dating them that would later be utilized to provide them with feedback about their dating profile. Then, participants were told that the goal of the study was to learn more about how single people evaluate dating profiles. To do so, participants were asked to create a dating profile that would be shared with and evaluated by students at an out-of-state university that was otherwise similar to the participants' university. Participants were told that a focus group at the collaborating university would view and evaluate their profile, and be asked whether or not they would be romantically interested in the participant. Participants were then informed that they needed to return to the laboratory for a second session to receive feedback from the other university because it can be unsettling to be evaluated by others without knowing the results of those evaluations. Participants were given time to create their dating profile by uploading a picture of themselves and completing biographic information through a Qualtrics survey that was designed to resemble Match.com. After creating their dating profile, participants were informed that the first part of the study was over and reminded they should return one week later to receive feedback about their profile. Unbeknownst to participants, participants' profiles were not evaluated by anyone.

When participants returned for their feedback, they were reminded of the goals of the study, that they previously completed a dating profile, and that they had completed a questionnaire assessing others' interest in them. Participants were informed that people often inaccurately perceive the number of people that are actually interested in them. Participants were then randomly assigned to receive feedback ostensibly from the focus group that either fewer or more people expressed interest in their profile than they expected. Those in the few partners condition were informed that few people in the focus group were interested in them (i.e., "It turns out that a lot fewer people are interested in you than what you originally thought!"). In contrast, participants in the many partners condition were informed that many people in the focus group were interested in them (i.e., "It turns out that a lot more people are interested in you than what you originally thought!"). After receiving the feedback, participants were asked to complete additional questionnaires ostensibly intended to help further understand the process of how people create and evaluate dating profiles. Participants reported their commitment readiness and filler questionnaires intended to hide the true purpose of the study. Finally, participants were debriefed and granted class credit for their participation. All procedures were registered before data collection.

### **7.1.3. Measures**

#### **7.1.3.1. Commitment readiness**

Participants completed the same commitment readiness measure used in the previous studies ( $M = 43.47$ ;  $SD = 13.12$ ;  $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

#### **7.1.3.2. Manipulation check**

Participants responded to one item ("I find that potential romantic partners tend to like me") that was included with six filler items intended to conceal the purpose of the manipulation check, using a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

## **7.2. Results**

Preliminary analyses revealed that men and women did not differ in their reports of commitment readiness,  $t(83) = 0.50$ ,  $p = .613$ ,  $d = 0.11$ .

### **7.2.1. Was the manipulation successful?**

To examine the effectiveness of the manipulation, an independent samples t-test revealed that participants in the many partners condition ( $M = 3.81$ ;  $SD = 1.38$ ) did not differ from those in the few partners condition ( $M = 3.98$ ;  $SD = 1.55$ ) regarding their perceptions of being liked by potential romantic partners,  $t(85) = -0.53$ ,  $p = .595$ ,  $d = -0.12$ . However, upon retrospectively reviewing the item used for the manipulation check, it is possible that the item led participants to reflect more on previous experiences rather than the current information they were given about potential romantic partners due to the item emphasizing a pattern of experiences (i.e., "tend to"). Because of this, the item may not have assessed their beliefs about current interest from others and thus may not be a true reflection of the effectiveness of the manipulation.

### **7.2.2. Did perceived partners affect commitment readiness?**

Consistent with our predictions, those in the many partners condition ( $n = 42$ ;  $M = 37.93$ ;  $SD = 13.47$ ) reported that they were significantly less ready to enter into a committed relationship than did those in the few partners condition ( $n = 45$ ;  $M = 48.64$ ;  $SD = 10.51$ ),  $t(85) = -4.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -0.90$ , 95% CI  $[-15.85, -5.58]$ . Supplemental analyses were also conducted to identify potential mechanisms of this effect (see OSM); however, these analyses were likely underpowered and thus should be interpreted with caution.

### **7.3. Discussion**

Study 2 provides more ecologically-valid evidence that greater perceived available partners decrease one's readiness to enter into a committed relationship. Specifically, participants who were informed that many people were romantically interested in them reported being less ready to enter into a committed relationship compared to participants who were informed that few people were romantically interested in them.

Nevertheless, Study 2 has three important limitations. First, Study 2 was conducted prior to Study 1b and thus, like Study 1a, included a sub-optimal manipulation check. Second, although participants received feedback about others who were ostensibly romantically interested in them, they were told that those others were at a different university and thus they did not have the potential to meet or date them. Although participants may have assumed that such feedback would be similar to the interest that they would receive from people who live near them and thus are available dating partners, we did not examine this possibility. Finally, none of the previous studies identified why perceived available partners decreases commitment readiness.<sup>1</sup> Study 3 addressed these limitations.

## **8. Study 3**

The goal of Study 3 was to replicate and extend Study 2 by manipulating participants' perceptions of people who were not only interested in them, but also lived near them and could serve as potential partners. A second goal of Study 3 was to better understand why perceptions of greater potential partners decrease commitment readiness by examining the role of several potential mechanisms of this effect. Specifically, we examined whether perceiving greater potential partners increases participants' selectivity, self-esteem, or perceived mate-value, or decreases their defensive esteem, fear of being single, or rejection sensitivity, and consequently decreases their commitment readiness. Like Study 2, participants in Study 3 first created a profile for a dating website. A week later, participants were recontacted and told that others evaluated their profile and were provided with direct feedback indicating that either many or few people who lived near them were romantically interested in them. Finally, participants completed questionnaires assessing their commitment readiness and potential mechanisms (e.g., selectivity, self-esteem). Based on the results from the previous studies, we predicted that commitment readiness would be lower among participants who ostensibly received interest from many, compared to few, people on their dating profiles. Further, we decided that if this hypothesis was supported, we would conduct mediational analyses to examine whether any of the potential mechanisms that we identified would mediate the association between interest from potential partners and commitment readiness.

## **8.1. Method**

### **8.1.1. Participants**

Participants were recruited from MTurk and were eligible to participate if they were (a) single, (b) not currently using any online dating services because we did not want previous feedback from online dating services to override the feedback they would receive during the study, (c) between the ages of 25–35 because this age group is most likely to engage with dating apps (Vogels, 2020), and (d) heterosexual because the feedback they would receive during the study reflected the typical amount of matches that heterosexual men and women receive on online dating services (for review, Abramova, Baumann, Krasnova, & Buxmann, 2016) and we were unable to find information about the typical amount of matches that non-heterosexual men and women receive. An a priori power analysis based on the most conservative effect size from the previous studies ( $d = 0.41$ ) indicated that 190 people were necessary to achieve power greater than 0.80. Two hundred and fifty-six participants were initially recruited; however, 31 (12%) were excluded for failing attention checks and 35 (14%) did not complete the second part of the study, leaving 190 usable participants (81 female, 109 male;  $M_{age} = 30.31$  years,  $SD_{age} = 3.22$  years). A majority of participants (80.0%) identified as Caucasian, 11.1% as Black or African-American, 2.6% as Asian, 9.2% as Hispanic or Latino/a, 1.6% as American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.1% as two or more ethnicities, and 1.1% did not report their ethnicity.

### **8.1.2. Procedure**

Participants completed the study on Qualtrics. After providing informed consent, participants were informed that the ostensible purpose of the study was to help a popular online dating service develop an improved matching algorithm to assess compatibility of potential dating partners. Participants then created a dating profile that included their geographical location. Next, participants were shown the dating profiles of 50 people of their preferred gender who ostensibly lived near them and were asked whether or not they were romantically interested in each person. Participants were then told that over the next week, their profile would be viewed and evaluated by the 50 people who the participants just evaluated. Unbeknownst to participants, participants' profiles were not evaluated by anyone.

Roughly one week later, participants were recontacted, reminded of the goals of the study, and provided information about their matches (i.e., people who the participant were romantically interested in and who were ostensibly also interested in the participant). Participants were then informed of the typical amount of matches that people of their gender receive. Because women tend to receive more interest on dating services than do men (Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019), female participants were told that, “on average, women match with approximately 30% of singles on our dating service”, whereas male participants were told that, “on average, men match with approximately 12% of singles on our dating service.” Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions that determined the feedback that they would receive. Whereas those in the few partners condition were informed that they matched with half as many people as the average person of their gender (e.g., “You matched with 6% [15%] of singles on our dating service.”), those in the many partners condition were informed that they matched with twice as many people as the average person of their gender (e.g., “You matched with 24% [60%] of singles on our dating service.”). After receiving the feedback, participants were asked to complete

additional questionnaires ostensibly intended to help us further understand the process of how people create and evaluate dating profiles. Participants then completed manipulation checks, filler questionnaires intended to hide the true purpose of the study, measures assessing potential mechanisms (e.g., selectivity, self-esteem), and a measure of commitment readiness. Finally, participants were debriefed and compensated for their participation. All procedures were registered before data collection.

### **8.1.3. Measures**

#### **8.1.3.1. Commitment readiness**

Participants completed the same commitment readiness measure used in the previous studies ( $M = 49.54$ ;  $SD = 11.05$ ;  $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

#### **8.1.3.2. Mechanisms**

Participants completed several measures that assess potential mechanisms that would account for the effect of perceived potential partners on commitment readiness. First, to assess the extent of participants' selectivity of romantic partners, participants completed the Romantic Partner Selectivity Scale, which was created for this study ( $M = 47.13$ ;  $SD = 9.15$ ;  $\alpha = 0.71$ ). Second, to assess self-esteem, participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965;  $M = 15.97$ ;  $SD = 3.27$ ;  $\alpha = 0.87$ ). Third, to assess perceived mate value, participants completed three items from the Mate Value Scale (Edlund & Sagarin, 2014;  $M = 15.97$ ;  $SD = 3.64$ ;  $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Fourth, to assess defensive esteem, participants completed the justification subscale of the Self-Presentation Tactics Scale (Less, Quigley, Nesler, Corbett, & Tedeschi, 1999;  $M = 27.92$ ;  $SD = 9.61$ ;  $\alpha = 0.88$ ). Fifth, to assess fear of being single, participants completed the Fear of Being Single Scale (Spielmann et al., 2013;  $M = 16.18$ ;  $SD = 5.92$ ;  $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Finally, to assess rejection sensitivity, participants completed the concern subscale of the Rejection Sensitivity Scale (Downey & Feldman, 1996;  $M = 16.29$ ;  $SD = 4.05$ ;  $\alpha = 0.75$ ). For each measure, appropriate items were reverse coded and all items were summed. Additional information about each measure (e.g., all items, response options) can be found in the OSM.

#### **8.1.3.3. Manipulation checks**

Participants responded to the same three items that assessed their perceptions of available partners that were described in Study 1b. Internal consistency was acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ). To establish the construct validity of the manipulation, participants also responded to the seven other alternative manipulation checks that were described in Study 1b.

## **8.2. Results**

Preliminary analyses revealed that men and women did not differ in their reports of commitment readiness,  $t(188) = -0.31$ ,  $p = .760$ ,  $d = 0.04$ , selectivity,  $t(188) = -1.21$ ,  $p = .227$ ,  $d = 0.18$ , self-esteem,  $t(188) = 0.02$ ,  $p = .987$ ,  $d = 0.00$ , perceived mate-value,  $t(187) = -0.26$ ,  $p = .792$ ,  $d = 0.04$ , defensive esteem,  $t(188) = -1.34$ ,  $p = .181$ ,  $d = 0.20$ , fear of being single,  $t(188) = -0.59$ ,  $p = .554$ ,  $d = 0.09$ , and rejection sensitivity,  $t(188) = -0.55$ ,  $p = .584$ ,  $d = 0.08$ .

### **8.2.1. Was the manipulation successful?**

Confirming the effectiveness of the manipulation, participants in the many partners condition ( $M = 14.92$ ;  $SD = 4.03$ ) reported perceiving more available partners than did participants in the few partners condition ( $M = 13.59$ ;  $SD = 4.18$ ),  $t(188) = 2.23$ ,  $p = .027$ ,  $d = 0.32$ . Providing evidence for the construct validity of the manipulation, participants in the two conditions did not differ from one another in regard to their responses to the alternative manipulation checks, specifically, their perceptions of the amount of single people who live near them,  $t(188) = 1.41$ ,  $p = .161$ ,  $d = 0.21$ , enjoyment from interacting with others,  $t(187) = -0.55$ ,  $p = .583$ ,  $d = -0.08$ , perceived mate value,  $t(188) = 0.19$ ,  $p = .853$ ,  $d = 0.03$ , ease finding potential partners,  $t(188) = 1.34$ ,  $p = .184$ ,  $d = 0.19$ , social network size,  $t(188) = 1.33$ ,  $p = .184$ ,  $d = 0.20$ , previous dating success,  $t(188) = 0.00$ ,  $p = .998$ ,  $d = 0.00$ , and, unlike Study 1b, their perceptions of others' dating options,  $t(188) = -0.23$ ,  $p = .820$ ,  $d = -0.03$ .

### **8.2.2. Did perceived partners affect commitment readiness?**

Consistent with our predictions, those in the many partners condition ( $n = 96$ ;  $M = 44.23$ ;  $SD = 9.48$ ) reported that they were significantly less ready to enter into a committed relationship than did those in the few partners condition ( $n = 94$ ;  $M = 54.97$ ;  $SD = 9.88$ ),  $t(188) = -7.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -1.11$ , 95% CI  $[-13.51, -7.97]$ . Further, after controlling for all seven alternative manipulation checks, participants' commitment readiness remained significantly lower in the many partners condition compared to the few partners condition,  $F(1, 180) = 57.92$ ,  $p < .001$ , suggesting that the effect of the manipulation on commitment readiness emerged due to changes in participants' perceptions of available partners, not other related constructs (e.g., previous dating success).

### **8.2.3. Did any of the potential mechanisms mediate the effect of perceived partners on commitment readiness?**

To better understand why perceptions of greater potential partners decrease commitment readiness, we examined the role of several potential mechanisms. First, we examined whether perceiving numerous potential partners affects each of these potential mechanisms. Results revealed that participants in the two conditions did not differ from one another in regard to their self-esteem,  $t(188) = -0.54$ ,  $p = .587$ ,  $d = -0.08$ , perceived mate-value,  $t(187) = -0.36$ ,  $p = .722$ ,  $d = -0.05$ , defensive esteem,  $t(188) = 0.18$ ,  $p = .856$ ,  $d = 0.03$ , fear of being single,  $t(188) = -0.82$ ,  $p = .412$ ,  $d = -0.12$ , or rejection sensitivity,  $t(188) = 0.52$ ,  $p = .604$ ,  $d = 0.08$ , suggesting that they do not account for the association between perceived partners and commitment readiness.

In contrast, those in the many partners condition ( $n = 96$ ;  $M = 48.88$ ;  $SD = 8.23$ ) reported being more selective when choosing a romantic partner than did those in the few partners condition ( $n = 94$ ;  $M = 45.35$ ;  $SD = 9.73$ ),  $t(188) = 2.70$ ,  $p = .008$ ,  $d = 0.39$ . Further, after controlling for participants' condition, selectivity was associated with reduced commitment readiness,  $b = -0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $t(187) = -2.05$ ,  $p = .041$ . Finally, we calculated an estimate of the mediated effect using RMediation (Tofighi & MacKinnon, 2011),  $b = -0.56$ , and computed the 95% confidence intervals  $(-1.36: -0.03)$  that indicated that selectivity mediated the association between perception of partners and commitment readiness.

## 9. General discussion

Despite the importance of commitment readiness for initiating (Hadden et al., 2018) and subsequently maintaining (Agnew et al., 2019) committed relationships, research has only begun to identify the factors that motivate feeling ready for a committed romantic relationship. Existing theory and research suggest that the extent to which people perceive they have numerous available partners should play a role in determining commitment readiness; however, they can be used to make competing predictions about whether such perceptions should increase or decrease commitment readiness. Five studies provided consistent evidence that perceiving many potential romantic partners is associated with decreased commitment readiness. The Pilot Study provided evidence that participants' perceived available partners were associated with their commitment readiness and revealed the direction of this association; participants were less ready to commit to a romantic relationship to the extent that they perceived having many available partners. Studies 1a, 1b, 2, and 3 tested the causal relationship between perception of available partners and commitment readiness by having participants read articles (Studies 1a and 1b) or receive false feedback (Studies 2 and 3) that increased or decreased their perceived available partners and subsequently reported their commitment readiness. Participants who were led to believe that they had many available romantic partners reported lower commitment readiness compared to participants who were led to believe that they had few available romantic partners.

One reason why perceiving numerous available partners decreases commitment readiness may be because it first makes people more selective when evaluating potential romantic partners. In particular, evolutionary perspectives suggest that it would be adaptive for people with numerous potential partners to adopt a cautious approach when considering potential partners because a cautious approach would decrease the likelihood of inadvertently committing to a less than optimal partner (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Thus, people who perceive numerous potential partners may experience lower commitment readiness because they would benefit from being more selective when evaluating potential partners to ensure they select the best possible partner. Results from Study 3 are consistent with this perspective. Specifically, participants who perceived many available partners reported a greater desire to be selective when choosing a potential romantic partner, and thus were less ready to commit to any given partner, compared to participants who perceived fewer partners.

### 9.1. Implications

These findings have important theoretical and practical implications. First, the majority of research on close relationships has addressed established relationships and has focused relatively little attention on what leads people to initiate romantic relationships (Eastwick, 2016; Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews, 2007). Nevertheless, the process of relationship initiation plays a critical role in subsequent relationship stability and longevity (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008), suggesting a need to identify factors that guide this process. The present research fills this gap in the literature by identifying an important construct—perceptions of available romantic partners—that informs whether single people feel ready to initiate a committed romantic relationship. Similarly, these studies join a growing body of literature that highlights the importance of commitment readiness for pursuing, forming, and maintaining romantic relationships (Agnew et al., 2019; Hadden et al., 2018; Riela, Rodriguez, Aron, Xu, & Acevedo, 2010). For example, commitment readiness has been associated with increased pursuit of romantic relationships (Hadden et al., 2018), falling in



love with a romantic partner (Aron, Dutton, Aron, & Iverson, 1989; Riela et al., 2010), and enacting more relationship maintenance behaviors once involved in a relationship (Agnew et al., 2019). Nevertheless, despite the importance of commitment readiness for subsequent relationship initiation and maintenance, the current studies are the first to identify factors that determine this important motive.

Second, results from Study 3 contribute to our understanding of the role that romantic partner selectivity plays in relationship initiation and established relationships. Specifically, past research suggests that people who are highly selective experience difficulty when making decisions and thus often avoid making challenging and consequential decisions (Misuraca, Faraci, Gangemi, Carmeci, & Miceli, 2015). Consistent with this idea, the current findings revealed that people who are more selective when choosing a romantic partner are less ready to commit to a romantic relationship. Furthermore, in the context of established romantic relationships, previous research has revealed that people who are highly selective tend to experience negative relational outcomes (e.g., lower relationship satisfaction and closeness, greater relational uncertainty and relationship regret; Mikkelson, Hesse, & Pauley, 2016). The current findings add to this literature by highlighting a potential reason why romantic partner selectivity may result in detrimental relationship outcomes: low commitment readiness. Specifically, low commitment readiness within established relationships is associated with decreased engagement in relationship maintenance behaviors (e.g., self-disclosure) and greater likelihood of relationship dissolution (Agnew et al., 2019). To this end, people who are highly selective of their romantic partners may experience detrimental relationship outcomes due to lowered commitment readiness.

Finally, recent advances in technology and the rise in online dating services (Smith & Duggan, 2013) highlight the practical implications of these findings. For instance, past research (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012; Taubert, Van der Burg, & Alais, 2016) has revealed that the ability to peruse hundreds of dating profiles tends to increase perceptions of available potential partners. Results from the current studies suggest that this immediate online access to numerous potential partners may consequently undermine users' willingness to feel ready to commit to any one person. Indeed, access to so many potential partners, that are otherwise unlikely to be available in-person, can be overwhelming (Thomas, Binder, & Matthes, 2022) and reduce the likelihood of selecting any given partner (Fisman, Iyengar, Kamenica, & Simonson, 2006; Lenton & Francesconi, 2011). Furthermore, given that a vast majority of US adolescents use the Internet (95%; Lenhart et al., 2011) and approximately 32% of US adults between the ages of 18–34 use online dating services (Smith & Duggan, 2013), the implications of online dating, and thus having many potential partners available, for subsequent commitment readiness and relationship initiation are likely most salient for adolescents and young adults. Consistent with these ideas, current young adults are more likely to delay entering into committed relationships compared to previous generations (Cherlin, 2010; Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). Thus, while the goal of online dating services may be to facilitate relationship initiation, they may actually accomplish the opposite by providing people with too many potential partners and thus decreasing the motivation to commit to a romantic relationship (for review, see Brady & Baker, 2022).

## **9.2. Study strengths, weaknesses, and future directions**

Several aspects of the present studies increase our confidence in the results. First, the effect of perceptions of available partners on commitment readiness was observed in five different samples

that were diverse in ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and gender, increasing our confidence in the external validity of our findings. Second, Studies 1a, 1b, 2, and 3 experimentally manipulated perceptions of available partners using different manipulations. Future research may benefit from comparing these different conceptualizations of perceptions of available partners to determine which impacts commitment readiness the most. For example, expected available romantic partners (assessed in the Pilot Study) was considered comparable to current available romantic partners (manipulated in Studies 1a, 1b, 2, and 3) given that expected interpersonal experiences are often shaped by current experiences (Baker et al., 2017) and such expectations influence interpersonal decisions (Baker, Cobb, McNulty, Lambert and Fincham, 2016, Baker, McNulty, Brady and Montalvo, 2020). However, expected and current perceptions of available romantic partners may be distinct and thus have distinct implications for commitment readiness. Third, Studies 2 and 3 provided more ecologically-valid tests of our predictions by providing feedback via a method frequently utilized by singles—online dating forums. Finally, Study 3 provided initial evidence for why perceiving numerous potential partners decreases commitment readiness; specifically, participants who perceived many available partners were more selective when choosing a potential romantic partner, and thus experienced lower commitment readiness.

Nevertheless, several aspects of these studies limit the conclusions that can be drawn until they can be replicated and extended. Specifically, although Studies 2 and 3 provided more ecologically-valid tests of our predictions by providing feedback through online dating forums, it remains unclear how perceptions of available in-person partners may distinctly inform commitment readiness. To this end, future research may benefit from addressing this research question by using a speed dating paradigm (see Finkel et al., 2007) to capture perceptions of available in-person partners and subsequent commitment readiness. Similarly, although the current studies demonstrated that perceptions of available partners decrease commitment readiness, it did not address whether it has downstream implications for the decision to pursue or initiate an actual relationship. Although this possibility appears likely given that commitment readiness tends to motivate relationship initiation (Hadden et al., 2018), future research would benefit by testing this possibility.

### **9.3. Conclusion**

What factors inform a person's feelings of readiness to enter into a committed romantic relationship? The current results revealed that perceptions of available partners robustly predicts readiness to begin a committed relationship. Specifically, when people perceive many available romantic partners, they tend to become less ready to commit to a romantic relationship than when they perceive few available romantic partners. This tendency appeared to be unrelated to other related processes, such as perceptions of mate value and previous dating success, further highlighting the importance of perceived available partners when evaluating one's readiness to begin a committed relationship. Finally, initial evidence suggests that romantic partner selectivity may account for the association between perceived partners and commitment readiness; specifically, people who perceive many available partners may experience lower commitment readiness because their standards for a romantic partner are higher compared to people who perceive few available partners. Together, these results add to a growing literature on the construct of commitment readiness, and more broadly on romantic relationship initiation, and furthers understanding about why people choose to initiate a romantic relationship or remain single.

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