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## Internet as a Meeting Place for Spouses: Online Dating, Homogamy and Assortative Mating in Contemporary Italy

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### Abstract

In this article places where spouses first met in Italy are studied. The focus is on online settings in the most recent marriage cohorts (2000-2016). The aim is to investigate trends over time of using the Internet as a meeting place and to explore whether Internet dating can affect assortative mating and homogamy rules. Information on first marriages is analysed to study highly committed and long-lasting relationships between partners. Data used for the analyses come from the nationally representative survey "Family, Social Subjects and Life Cycle" carried out by the Italian National Statistical Institute (Istat) in 2016 on a sample of about 32,000 individuals made available in 2020. The results allow a preliminary quantification of the phenomenon and document an increase in meetings occurring online in Italy (from 0.4 per cent in the marriage cohort 2000-2009 to 2.5 per cent in the marriage cohort 2010-2016). Furthermore, data support the idea that online contexts show homogamy paths not different from those that characterize offline dating venues. Meeting a partner online does not seem to imply heterogamy.

**Keywords:** Couples' place of meeting, Internet dating, mate selection, homogamy, marriage

## Introduction

In recent decades, the Internet has emerged as a globally interconnected system that tends to affect individual and social lives in many areas, such as work, education, culture, shopping, politics, sports, and leisure time. The Net provides a range of places, services and ways of communication mediated by technology, through which social relationships can be created, maintained or broken up within a context of mutual permeability between online and offline interactions (for a review see Fussey & Roth, 2020).

As far as family, marriage and intimate relationships are concerned, the Web is beginning to be regarded by scholars as a place where it is possible to experience many stages of a couple's experience, beginning with the first meeting, moving through the establishment of the relationship, the fulfillment of emotional and sexual needs, and ending with infidelity and the break up of the relationship (Lea & Spears, 1995; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Ben-Ze'ev, 2004)<sup>1</sup>. Online context shapes these experiences through its routines and operating rules. At the same time, users help to draw boundaries and transform patterns and models of behavior (Dutton, 1996; Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1985; Woolger, 1996). Therefore, in contemporary societies the Web can be thought as one of the institutions in which individuals have experiences related to the emotional and family sphere. Some romances are volatile and end in the short term, others lead to long-lasting and committed bonds, including cohabitation and marriage. Sometimes the relationships are experienced exclusively online, more often they are deeply intertwined with the face-to-face experience (Merkle & Richardson, 2000; Whitty, 2005).

A central theme in family studies concerns the dynamics of mate selection in long-term relationships that result in marriage (Potarca, 2014). With regard to individual lives, partner choice tend to influence personal well-being and subsequent stages of family formation (on the former issue see, among the others, Dush & Amato, 2005; Soons et al., 2009; on the latter see Smock & Greenland, 2010 ). At the macro level, patterns of spouse selection are an indicator of closeness or openness of a society and offer insights on social stratification and inequality (Weber, 1922; Blau & Duncan, 1967; Blossfeld, 2009).

Returning to digital technologies and their impact on family and marriage, the Internet is one of the venues where a partner can be met, whether in places used for activities such as gaming, chatting and sharing

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the focus is on the impact of the Net on the venues where spouses first meet. The spread of the Internet affects many aspects of marriage and intimate relationships. Arosio (2013) offers a review and propose a research agenda to investigate the effects of the Internet on different stages of marriage and family life.

ideas, or in specialized dating sites and apps<sup>2</sup>. Studies investigated how many spouses first met on the Internet and empirical evidence documented an increase in the number of couples who first met online in several western contemporary society (for a review, see Lampard, 2020). Another question concerns the sociodemographic characteristics of those who met online, the quality of the marriage that is arranged, and the likelihood of divorce, especially compared to couples who met offline (see, among the others, Cacioppo et al., 2013; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Research has focused on differences in the use of the Internet as a meeting place among population groups (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012; Potarca, 2017). Moreover, an important topic concerns the rules of the Internet as a meeting place compared with venues where meetings take place face to face. The question was posed of how online meetings may affect the rules of partner selection, assortative mating and so the social stratification system (Potarca, 2017). It is not clear either if Internet dating can promote selection between partners with different social characteristics or confirm the rule of social homogamy.

This research fits in the international debate on the place of partner meeting with a focus on online venues in contemporary Italy<sup>3</sup>. Italian society appears as an interesting target because it shows elements of both tradition and push toward modernization. Compared to European countries, Italy is still tied to traditional family models (Eurostat, 2019; Istat, 2021). However, in recent decades, Italy has experienced steps toward social change reflecting the family transformations that occurred in Western countries (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Lesthaeghe, 2014; Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008; OECD, 2019). Some key demographic changes that occurred in Italy are falling fertility rates, migration growth, increase in average life expectancy and population aging. About marriage, some of these changes include avoidance or delay in marriage entry, growth in non marital cohabitation, and the increase in legal separations and divorces (Istat, 2021).

The works aims to offer a contribution to the study of family dynamics, social change and social inequality. Firstly, an attempt to estimate through official data the proportion of spouses who first met online in Italy is presented, to monitor dynamics of social change. Secondly, the patterns of mate selection are investigated among those who met online to study the orientation toward homogamy or heterogamy in comparison to spouses who

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<sup>2</sup> There are different types of dating sites, some designed for finding occasional relationships, others for committed relationships (see Fiore, 2010). Some sites are dedicated to population groups with specific preferences and who experience particular situations (for an introduction, see Sprecher et al., 2008).

<sup>3</sup> These issues have not yet been studied when referring to Italian society and need to be addressed. The value given by the study of family processes through various contexts is considerable (see Cooke & Baxter, 2010; Kalmijn, 2007; Lee & Ono, 2012).

met in offline venues. In conclusion, some limitations of the empirical data currently available are discussed and some ideas to improve them are suggested..

### **Evidences, causes and consequences**

In contemporary Western societies, the number of spouses meeting for the first time online has grown dramatically, siding (and in some cases surpassing) traditional meeting places such as school, work, neighborhood, and friendship (for a summary, see Lampard, 2020).

There are several factors that help explain the growing importance of the Internet as a meeting place for partners in contemporary societies. The use of traditional meeting places may be limited by various circumstances, such as the absence of available partners, lack of time, the presence of special needs or interests, and insecurity (Woll & Cozby, 1987). The Internet offers access to a very large number of potential partners, rapidly, at low cost, comfortably and privately with no time pressure (Sprecher et al., 2008). Another advantage of the Web is that people who have specific interests or exhibit socially undesirable characteristics can more easily find a partner to interact with online. Online venues open up a wide audience of possible partners (Finkel et al., 2012) over which much information is given (Heino et al., 2010; Lawson & Leck, 2006), so giving a sense of better control over marriage choices (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008).

The popularity of specialized dating sites can also be read in light of some changes in the expectations of individuals in contemporary societies (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992; Coupland, 1996). As a result of transformations in cultural patterns, which are connected with the process of individualization, the spread of values such as self-fulfilment, independence, and the need of personal satisfaction, marriage can be conceived by recent cohorts as an experience that must be both rewarding and up to individual standards (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1990; Giddens, 1992; Bauman, 2003). Therefore, a formal agent that assists in the choice and guarantees its goodness may be desirable (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992). Moreover in contemporary societies social pressure to get married has decreased, so that individuals can continue the search until they have found the right partner. The delayed marriage can result in the partner being found out of the educational system, which is one of the main marriage markets (Sabotka & Toulemon, 2008). The general shift toward a service economy also makes it possible to make use of marriage services carried out by professionals, who have also been able to reduce the social stigma associated with those who use them (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992; Lampard, 2020). Using the Internet to find a partner has become a socially accepted practice (Smith & Duggan, 2013).

An important issue related to the spread of online meetings is the assortative patterns of marriage selection. It is known that couple choices in contemporary societies prove to be strongly oriented toward homogamy, which means the similarity of partners according to relevant social characteristics, such as educational qualification, occupation, social origin, and geographical belonging (see among the others Blossfeld & Timm, 2013; Kalmijn, 1998; Schwartz, 2013).

It is unclear whether online dating is likely to increase or decrease homogamy patterns (for a review, Arosio, 2013; Potarca, 2017). On a theoretical level, it could be argued that couples who meet online are more inclined to heterogamy than face-to-face relationships. Through the Web, the lack of physical and social proximity can facilitate experiences between people who belong to social groups that in face-to-face relationships would exhibit lower levels of social permeability (Houston et al., 2005).

At the opposite, the use of the Net may encourage homogamy due to the availability of information about partners and the potential to pre-select contacts based on users' characteristics (Schwartz, 2013). Sites dedicated to partner selection tend to collect large amounts of information about their members, and to create matches based on compatibility, which often translates into the similarity of potential partners (Finkel et al., 2012; Gottlieb, 2006). About this last point, some empirical evidence would seem to suggest that even in online dating, at least in the initial contact, a great deal of emphasis is placed on homogamy (Lewis, 2013; Lin & Lundquist, 2013; Robnett & Feliciano, 2011; Yancey, 2007), especially educational homogamy (Skopek et al., 2010).

## Methods

In this article, the places where Italian spouses first met are studied, with a focus on online venues in the most recent marriage cohorts (for an updated in-depth study of partners' meeting places in offline contexts in contemporary Italy see Arosio, 2022).

Two types of analysis are carried out in this article. A first attempt to quantify the phenomenon of online partner meetings in Italy is conducted and trends in the development of the phenomenon are traced. Spouses are studied from the year of marriage 2000 and are divided into two cohorts. Cohort 2000-2009 includes the first group of Italian spouses to have had Internet access; in the other cohort (2010-2016), partners were widely exposed to the Internet in the years before marriage. A growth of web-

mediated meetings over cohorts is expected in accordance with the arguments outlined in the second paragraph<sup>4</sup>.

Then, the rates of homogamy of the couples that first met on line are measured. The hypothesis is that the similarity rule is respected, although different meeting places tend to exhibit different levels of assortative mating (Blau, 1977; Bozon & Heran, 1989; Kalmijn & Flap, 2001; Lampard, 2007; Mollenhorst et al., 2008). It is expected that online environments are not subtracted from the rule of homogamy. Even on the Internet, cultural and social rules driving to homogamy in offline contexts are supposed to lead to choose among similars. The availability of information about possible partners helps in this direction. In order to support this hypothesis, a binomial logistic regression will be conducted, to study the effect of online meeting on the probability of getting married between dissimilars, compared with other offline meeting venues, while controlling for the effect of other relevant variables.

Data used in the analyses come from the nationally representative survey "Family, Social Subjects and the Life Cycle" conducted by Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) in 2016 and made available in 2020. The survey is one of the main statistical sources on family and households in Italy and supports updated analyses of their dynamics over time. The survey is carried out on a sample of about 32,000 individuals distributed in 852 Italian municipalities of different demographic size. Data were collected by face-to-face interview (PAPI) by municipal interviewers<sup>5</sup>.

The analyses conducted in this article concern the first marriage of people who have been married at least once. The choice to study marriages meets the need to consider highly committed and long lasting relationships. The Internet as a source of occasional dating is not studied here<sup>6</sup>. Enduring relationships involving families and social groups are analyzed, because the very reason for the study of meeting places is linked to dynamics of social closure and social mobility (Weber, 1922), measured through the level of homogamy of spouses (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Blossfeld, 2009; Fernández & Rogerson, 2001; Mare, 2000). The analysis of the first marriage provides a way to control for the attrition caused by separation, divorce and widowhood.

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<sup>4</sup> Multivariate analyses connecting online dating to spouse sociodemographic characteristics and structural determinants were not possible, due to the small number of subjects in the dataset who met online (see Table 1).

<sup>5</sup> Full information on the Survey can be found at <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/185678>. Data sets were released by Istat and the application process was supported by the center Unidata, University of Milano Bicocca.

<sup>6</sup> Some online relationships break down long before partner get to a face-to-face meeting; others vanish after the first meeting (Merkle & Richardson, 2000).

In the dataset used for the analyses, it is not possible to distinguish meetings that take place on dating sites from those that occur in other venues such as chatrooms, forums and discussion groups, even if it would be very interesting to have this information (Cacioppo et al., 2013; Sprecher, 2009).

The dataset used allow only educational homogamy to be studied, and not other partners' characteristics. However, educational homogamy is a very relevant piece of information for research purposes. In contemporary societies, education levels are strongly related to occupational position and socioeconomic status (Blossfeld, 2009; Fu & Heaton, 2008; Rosenfeld, 2008), including cultural preferences and resources (Hou & Myles, 2008; Mare, 1991). Educational homogamy affects the processes of social mobility and the system of intergenerational and intragenerational inequalities (Kalmijn, 1991; Schwartz & Mare, 2005; Beck & González-Sancho, 2009).

## Results

Table 1 shows the places where partners had their first meeting among those who married in the 21st century in Italy. The number of spouses who met on the Internet is low (about one percent of the total), nevertheless it shows a rapid growth over time, rising from 0.4 percent to 2.5 percent when comparing the 2000-2009 cohort and the 2010-2016 cohort (Table1).<sup>7</sup> These data are useful because they provide an initial estimate of the size of the phenomenon in Italy and its trend over time, using data from an official statistical source.

**Table 1.** Place of couples' meeting by marriage cohort (percentage values) and educational homogamy rate. First marriages. Spouses since year 2000. Italy. (N=3,906)

	2000-2009	2010-2016	Total (2000-2016)	Homogamy rate	Heterogamy/ Homogamy
School, University	7.6	7.2	7.5	75.2	0.3
Vacation place	6.2	7.1	6.5	54.8	0.8
Disco	9.1	8.2	8.8	51.5	0.9
Neighborhood	6.0	4.4	5.5	66.7	0.5
Street party	4.9	3.6	4.5	61.3	0.6
Friends' party	15.4	17.9	16.2	64.3	0.6

<sup>7</sup> The result related to the first marriage cohort (2000-2009) is consistent with a previous estimate based on a former survey that was carried out in 2009 (Arosio, 2017).

Friends and relatives house	17.1	14.8	16.3	58.5	0.7
Work place	9.6	13.5	10.9	60.3	0.7
Religious organization	1.8	2.1	1.9	49.8	1.0
Street	9.4	5.9	8.2	59.3	0.7
Public transport	0.7	0.6	0.6	70.3	0.4
Other public place	5.3	5.5	5.3	56.9	0.8
<b>Internet</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>60.3</b>	<b>0.7</b>
Other	6.5	6.8	6.6	64.6	0.5
Tot.	100.0	100.0	100.0	60.9	0.6
N.	2,618	1,288	3,906		

Source: Analyses by the Author on Istat data, Family, Social Subjects and Life Cycle Survey. Italy, 2016.

Data in table 1 show that even in the most recent marriage cohorts the rule of homogamy tends to be respected in Italy (overall, 60 percent of couples in the analyses are perfectly homogamous) <sup>8</sup>. There are some differences based on the meeting place (Table 1). As expected (Kalmijn & Flap, 2001; Mare, 2000), school and university lead to the formation of strongly educationally homogamous couples (3 out of 4 couples meeting in education venues are homogamous). Meeting places such as disco or religious associations show homogamy rates that drop around 50 percent. Spouses who first met on the Internet have a 60 per cent rate of educational homogamy, not far from the overall average (Table1).

A ratio of heterogamy to homogamy was calculated for each meeting place, where a value of 1 indicates any propensity, a value below 1 indicates propensity for homogamy, and a value above 1 indicates propensity for heterogamy (Table 1). No meeting place has a value above 1, indicating the prevalence of the homogamy rule. The place with the highest level of homogamy is school, with a ratio of heterogamy to homogamy of 0.3. Only

<sup>8</sup> The estimated rate of educational homogamy in first marriages in Italy during the period 1950-2016 in all meeting places is 61 percent (Arosio, 2022).The rate of educational homogamy at the time of engagement in relation to first marriage is used.

spouses who met for the first time in religious organizations, disco or vacation spots have a ratio close to 1 (meaning there is no propensity for similarity or difference between the partners). The ratio of heterogamy to homogamy does not exceed 0.7 when meeting online (Table 1). These data support the idea that online dating is influenced by social and cultural rules of similarity between partners.

To support the results that emerged from the bivariate analysis, multivariate binomial logistic regression model was conducted to test the effect of online meeting places on the likelihood of contracting heterogamous marriages, compared with offline places, taking into account other relevant variables that may influence levels of homogamy.

The dependent variable is the propensity to contract heterogamous marriages versus homogamous ones. The model's regressors are: meeting place (online venues vs offline contexts), marriage cohort (2000-2009 and 2010-2016), class of origin (expressed through the father's position), level of education (at the beginning of the engagement), size of town, and geographical area.

Table 2 shows the percentage distribution of variables in the logistic regression model.

**Table 2.** Distribution of the variables in the model. Italy. Marriage Cohort 2000-2016. Percentage values (N=3,573)

		Valid percent
Marriage cohort	2000-2009	66.9
	2010-2016	33.1
Class of origin	Higher class	3.8
	Middle class	22.6
	Self employed	30.5
	Working class	43.2
Education	University	11.8
	Secondary school	48.3
	Lower secondary	35.7
	Primary school	4.1
Size of town	Up to 10,000 inhabitants	37.4
	More than 10,000 inhabitants	62.6
Geographical area	Northwest	19.8
	Northeast	24.7

	Center	17.0
	South	28.5
	Islands	10.1

Source: Analyses by the Author on Istat data, Family, Social Subjects and Life Cycle Survey. Italy, 2016.

Table 3 shows the results of the binomial logistic regression model, which studies the effect of the independent variables on the probability of forming a heterogamous couple. The column B provides the estimated coefficients for predicting the dependent variable from the independent variables. The column St. Err. provides the standard errors associated with the coefficients. A 95% confidence interval for estimated coefficients is given by  $B \pm 1.96 * St.Err.$  The column Significance (Sig.) provides the p-value used in testing the null hypothesis that the coefficient is 0. Coefficients having a p-value of 0.05 or less are considered statistically significant. Exp(B) are hazard ratios.

**Table 3.** Logistic Regression of the propensity to establish heterogamous marriages on selected independent variables (N. 3,573). First Marriages. Italy. Marriage Cohort 2000-2016

		B	St.Err.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Meeting place	Others (Ref.)	0			
	Internet	0.034	0.331	0.917	1.035
Marriage cohort	2000-2009 (Ref.)	0.000			
	2010-2016	-0.094	0.075	0.206	0.910
Class of origin	Higher class (Ref.)	0			
	Middle class	0.226	0.181	0.212	1.254
	Self employed	0.124	0.178	0.486	1.132
	Working class	0.204	0.176	0.246	1.227

Education	University (Ref.)	0			
	Secondary school	-0.721	0.115	0.000	0.486
	Lower secondary	-0.645	0.119	0.000	0.525
	Primary school	0.233	0.186	0.211	1.263
Size of town	Up to 10,000 inhabitants (Ref.)	0.000			
	More than 10,000 inhabitants	-0.156	0.077	0.042	0.855
Geographical area	Northwest (Ref.)	0			
	Northeast	0.052	0.101	0.605	1.054
	Center	-0.093	0.105	0.376	0.911
	South	-0.081	0.100	0.422	0.923
	Islands	-0.146	0.124	0.240	0.864
Costant		0.097	0.200	0.627	1.102

Source: Analyses by the Author on Istat data, Family, Social Subjects and Life Cycle Survey. Italy, 2016

Regarding the factors in the models, Table 3 supports the hypothesis that meeting spouse online does not lead to heterogamy compared to offline meeting contexts. The effect of the Meeting Place parameter is low and not

statistically significant. Internet versus other venues does not change the propensity for heterogamous versus homogamous marriage.

The other variables were included in the model as control factors. We just note that having an intermediate level of education protects against heterogamy compared to having a very high or very low level of education.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, an analysis of Internet dating leading to marriage in Italy has been provided. The aim was to provide a framing of the topic, including a quantitative one, and to situate it within the tradition of studies on social change, social stratification and inequality.

Analyses revealed an increasing trend. About 0.5 percent of partners met on the Web among those who married in the period 2000-2009; the proportion rises to 2.5 percent among spouses in the cohort 2010-2016. The rate of meetings in online contexts in Italy is still small but growing rapidly. Moreover, the analyses concern encounters that resulted in marriage and predict very strong engagement of individuals and groups.

As far as homogamy is concerned, the analyses did not reveal differences of online dating venues when compared to offline places. Even in Internet meetings, the homogamy rule seems to prevail. This result suggests that cultural and social norms are likely to shape personal behavior and marriage choices, even in online environments.

## **Limitations and future improvements**

The study of Internet as a place of meeting for spouses appears to be important and should be further continued. Updated data will allow to follow trends of more recent marriage cohorts, in which the rate of online dating is likely to increase. Studying the link between online meetings and homogamy should be valuable, because homogamy and heterogamy levels reflect the degree of openness or closure of a society, as already suggested by the classic authors (Weber, 1922).

Suggestions for further studies in Italy can be drawn starting from the limits of currently available data. An enlargement of the study to cohabiting couples and same sex couples would be interesting to extend the understanding of the phenomenon. Similarly, analyses would benefit from having information about population groups that make specific use of technology to find partners (e.g., divorcees, seniors, single parents, people with disabilities, persons with specific sexual orientations and interests) (Baym, 2015; Sautter et al., 2010). It would also be interesting if there were large enough samples to allow multivariate analyses relating online dating to other characteristics - especially stratification related factors such as social

class, education, age, and territorial dimension (Cacioppo et al., 2013; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012; Lampard, 2020).

Together with quantitative data, in-depth studies should be developed to explore belief systems of the people involved. Research would benefit greatly from a mixed methods approach. A longitudinal perspective in both quantitative and qualitative studies would also be effective. This would provide material to better understand dynamics of social change and social inequalities in contemporary societies through the lens of personal and family relationships.

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