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

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Abstract

This article studies the places where spouses met for the first time in Italy. The focus is on online settings in the most recent marriage cohorts (2000-2009 and 2010-2016). The aim is to investigate trends over time in the use of the Internet as a meeting place and to explore whether Internet dating can affect the rules of assortative mating and homogamy. Information about first marriages is analyzed to focus on highly engaged relationships. A quantitative approach is used and bivariate and multivariate analyses are conducted. The data used for the analyses come from the national representative survey "Family, social subjects and life cycle" carried out by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) in 2016 and made available in 2020. The results allow a preliminary quantification of the phenomenon and document an increase in online dating in Italy (from 0.4 percent of spouses who first met online in the marriage cohort 2000-2009 to 2.5 percent in the cohort 2010-2016). The data support the idea that online contexts show homogamy paths not different from those that characterize offline dating venues. Meeting an online partner doesn't seem to imply heterogamy.

Keywords: Couples' place of meeting, Internet dating, mate selection, homogamy, social inequalities, marriage, Italy

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

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work, education, culture, shopping, politics, sports, and leisure time. The Net offers a range of places, services, and ways of communication mediated by technology, through which social relationships can be created, maintained, or broken up in a context of mutual permeability between online and offline interactions (for a review see Fussey & Roth, 2020).

As for family, marriage, and intimate relationships, the Web begins to be considered by scholars as a place where it is possible to experience many stages of the couple's life, starting from the first encounter, through the establishment of the relationship, the satisfaction of emotional and sexual needs, until infidelity and breakup of the relationship (Lea & Spears, 1995; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Ben-Ze'ev, 2004)[1]. The online context shapes these experiences through its routines and operating rules. At the same time, users help draw boundaries and transform patterns of behavior (Dutton, 1996; Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1985; Woolger, 1996). Therefore, in contemporary societies, the Web can be considered as one of the institutions in which individuals live experiences related to the emotional and family sphere. Some romantic relationships are volatile and end in the short term, while others lead to lasting and committed ties, including cohabitation and marriage. Sometimes relationships are lived exclusively online, more often they are deeply intertwined with 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 leading to marriage (Potarca, 2014). As regards individual lives, partner choice tends to influence personal well-being and the subsequent stages of family formation (on the first issue see, among others, Dush & Amato, 2005; Soons et al., 2009; on the second see Smock & Greenland, 2010). At the macro level, partner selection models are an indicator of the closeness or openness of society and offer indications about social stratification and inequality systems (Weber, 1922; Blau & Duncan, 1967; Blossfeld, 2009).

The Internet is one of the venues where a partner can be met, both in places used for activities such as gaming, chatting, and sharing ideas and in specialized dating sites and apps[2]. 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 contemporary Western

[1] The spread of the Internet affects many aspects of marriage and intimate relationships. Arosio (2013) offers a review and proposes a research agenda to investigate the effects of the Internet on different stages of marriage and family life.

[2] 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).

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societies (for a review, see Lampard, 2020). Another issue concerns the sociodemographic characteristics of those who met online, the quality of the arranged marriage, and the likelihood of divorce, especially compared to couples who met offline (see, among 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 et al., 2019; Plutarch, 2017). Moreover, an important topic concerns the rules of the Internet as a meeting place compared to the venues where meetings take place face to face. The question was posed of how online dating can influence partner selection rules, assortative mating, and the social stratification system (Potarca, 2017). It is not clear whether Internet dating can promote selection between partners with different social characteristics or confirm the rule of social homogamy.

This research aims to be part of the international debate on the meeting place between partners with a focus on online places in contemporary Italy[3]. Italian society appears as an interesting target because it shows elements of both traditions and a drive 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 that reflect family transformations in Western countries (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Lesthaeghe, 2014; Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008; OECD, 2019). Some of the main demographic changes in Italy are the decline in fertility rates, the growth of immigration, the increase in average life expectancy, and the aging of the population. Regarding marriage, some of these changes include avoidance or delay in access to marriage, the growth of non-marital cohabitation, and the increase in legal separations and divorces (Istat, 2021).

This work intends to contribute to the study of family dynamics, social changes, and social inequalities. First, an attempt is presented to estimate, through official data, the percentage of spouses who met for the first time online in Italy, to monitor the dynamics of social change. Secondly, the models of mate selection among those who met online in comparison with spouses who met in offline places are analyzed. In conclusion, some limitations of the currently available empirical data are discussed and some ideas for improvement are suggested.

Some evidence, causes, and consequences

In contemporary Western societies, the number of spouses meeting for the first time online has grown dramatically, equalizing (and in some cases

[3] These issues have not yet been studied when referring to Italian society and need to be addressed. The added value given by the comparative study of family processes is the considerable (see Cooke & Baxter, 2010; Lee & Ono, 2012).

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surpassing) traditional meeting places such as school, work, neighborhood, and friendships networks (for a summary, see Lampard, 2020).

Several factors 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 shyness (Woll & Cozby, 1987). The Internet offers access to a very large number of potential partners, quickly, cheaply, conveniently, and privately, without time pressure (Sprecher et al., 2008). Another advantage of the Web is that people who have specific interests or have socially undesirable characteristics can more easily find a partner to interact with online. Self-presentation and impression management strategies are possible (Erdogan, 2022). The online venues open a wide range of possible partners (Finkel et al., 2012) on which a lot of information is provided (Heino et al., 2010; Lawson & Leck, 2006), thus giving a sense of greater 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 the transformations of cultural models, linked to the individualization process, the dissemination of values such as self-realization, independence, and the need for personal satisfaction, marriage can be conceived by the most 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 the social pressure to marry has decreased, so individuals can continue the search until they have found the right partner. Delayed marriage can cause the partner to be found outside the educational system, which is one of the main marriage markets (Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008). The general shift towards a service economy also makes it possible to use marriage services performed by professionals, who have also been able to reduce the social *stigma* associated with those who turn to 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 dating concerns the models of partner selection. It is well known that the choices in contemporary societies are strongly oriented to homogamy, that is, to the similarity of partners based on relevant social characteristics, such as education, employment, social origin, and geographical affiliation (see among others Blossfeld & Timm, 2003; Kalmijn, 1998; Schwartz, 2013).

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

Conversely, the use of the Net can encourage homogamy through the availability of partner information and the ability to pre-select contacts based on user characteristics (Schwartz, 2013). Sites dedicated to the selection of partners tend to collect large amounts of information about their members and create compatibility-based meetings, which often results in the similarity of potential partners (Finkel et al., 2012; Gottlieb, 2006). Regarding the latter point, some empirical evidence would seem to suggest that even in online dating, at least in the initial contact, much importance is given to homogamy (Lewis, 2013; Lin & Lundquist, 2013; Robnett & Feliciano, 2011; Yancey, 2007), especially to 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. 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 in 2000 and are divided into two cohorts. Cohort 2000-2009 includes the first group of Italian spouses to have Internet access; in the other cohort (2010-2016), partners were widely exposed to the Internet in the years before marriage. According to Istat data (Italian National Institute of Statistics), in 2001 Italians who used the Internet every day were 7.1% of the population aged six years or older and 12.3% in the 25-44 age group. In 2006, the percentage increased to 14.1% in the population over six years old and 22.8% in the 25-44 age group. In 2011, 28.3% of the population 6 years and older and 42.2% of the 25-44 age group used the Internet every day. In 2016, the rate rose to 44.6% in the population six years and older and 66.0% in the

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24-44 age group[4]. A growth of web-mediated meetings over cohorts is expected by the issues outlined in the second paragraph[5].

Next, the homogamy rates of couples who met for the first time online are measured. The hypothesis is that the rule of similarity is respected, although different meeting places tend to show different levels of assortative coupling (Bozon & Heran, 1989; Kalmijn & Flap, 2001; Lampard, 2007; Mollenhorst et al., 2008). Online environments are not expected to be free from the rule of homogamy. Even on the Internet, the cultural and social rules that drive homogamy in offline contexts should lead to a choice of similar ones. The availability of information on possible partners helps in this direction. To support this hypothesis, a binomial logistic regression will be conducted to study the effect of the online meeting on the probability of marriage among dissimilar, compared to other offline meeting places, controlling 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 the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) in 2016 and made available in 2020. The survey is one of the main statistical sources on families 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 sizes. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews (PAPI) with municipal interviewers[6].

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 [7]. Lasting relationships involving families and social groups are analyzed, because the very reason for the study of meeting places is linked to the 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 the attrition caused by separation, divorce, and widowhood.

[4] The data are publicly available at: Stat (see http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV_ICT#)

[5] 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).

[6] 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. Data are allowed to be used for research purposes.

[7] Some online relationships break down long before partners get to a face-to-face meeting; others vanish after the first meeting (Merkle & Richardson, 2000).

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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 online venues such as chatrooms, forums, and discussion groups, even if it would be very interesting to have this information (Cacioppo et al., 2013; Sprecher et al., 2008).

The dataset used allows 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 the occupational position and socioeconomic status (Blossfeld, 2009; Fu & Heaton, 2008), including cultural preferences and resources (Hou & Myles, 2008; Mare, 2000). Educational homogamy affects the processes of social mobility and the system of intergenerational and intragenerational inequalities (Kalmijn, 1998; Schwartz, 2013; Beck & González-Sancho, 2009).

Descriptive analysis

Table 1 shows the places where partners had their first meeting among those who married in the 21st century in Italy. The proportion of spouses who met on the Internet is low (about one percent of the total), especially when compared with the situation of other contemporary Western countries (Lampard, 2020). Nevertheless, the rate shows rapid growth over time, rising from 0.4 percent to 2.5 percent when comparing the 2000-2009 cohort and the 2010-2016 cohort (Table 1).[8] These data are useful because they provide an initial estimate of the extent 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 the year 2000. Italy. (N=3,906).

	Cohort 2000-2009	Cohort 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
Friends‘ and relatives‘ house	17.1	14.8	16.3	58.5	0.7
Workplace	9.6	13.5	10.9	60.3	0.7

[8] The result referring 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).

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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 places	5.3	5.5	5.3	56.9	0.8
Internet	**0.4**	**2.5**	**1.1**	**60.3**	**0.7**
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)[9]. 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 discos or religious associations show homogamy rates that drop around 50 percent. Spouses who first met on the Internet have a 60 percent rate of educational homogamy, not far from the overall average (Table 1).

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 a propensity for homogamy, and a value above 1 indicates a 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 spouses who met for the first time in religious organizations, discos, or holiday places have a ratio close to 1 (meaning that 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 enter the debate on the consequences of online meetings (see Arosio, 2013; Potarca, 2017) and support the idea that online dating is influenced by social and cultural rules of similarity between partners.

Multivariate analysis

To support the results that emerged from the bivariate analysis, a multivariate binomial logistic regression model was conducted to test the

[9] 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 education homogamy at the time of engagement in relation to first marriage is used.

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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 the 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)

Variables in the model		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. 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 ± 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-

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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.

Variables in the model		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			
	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			
	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
Constant		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

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Regarding the factors in the models, Table 3 supports the hypothesis that meeting a 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.

As previously seen in the literature, online venues open up a wide audience of potential partners. They can facilitate experiences between people belonging to social groups who in face-to-face relationships would show lower levels of social permeability (Finkel et al. 2012; Houston et al., 2005). However, the data presented here seem to confirm the homogamy rule found in face-to-face relationships. In contemporary societies, the spouses seem strongly oriented towards similarity based on relevant social characteristics, and reflect models of social closure between groups (*sensu* Weber, 1922).

Conclusion

In this article, an analysis of Internet dating leading to marriage in Italy was provided. The aim was to frame the topic, also quantitatively, and place it within the tradition of studies on social change, social stratification, and social inequality. These data were necessary to offer elements of knowledge about Italian society to be placed in the international debate on the growth of online meetings and its consequences on partner selection models.

The analysis revealed a growing trend in Italy. About 0.5 percent of partners met on the Web among those who married in the period 2000-2009; the percentage rises to 2.5 percent among spouses in the cohort 2010-2016. The rate of online dating in Italy is still small but growing rapidly. In addition, the analyses concern meetings that have led to marriage and involve a very strong commitment of individuals and groups.

As far as homogamy is concerned, the analyses revealed no differences between online meeting places and offline dating. Even in Internet dating the rule of homogamy seems to prevail. This finding suggests that cultural and social norms tend to shape personal behavior and marriage choices, even in online environments. In Italy as in other contemporary western countries, online dating is growing but this does not seem to affect the system of inequality that is found in face-to-face relationships.

Limitations and future improvements

The study of the Internet as a meeting place for spouses has proved important and should be further continued. Updated data will allow following the trends of the most recent marriage cohorts, where the rate of online dating

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is likely to increase. Studying the link between online dating and homogamy should be valuable, because the levels of homogamy reflect the degree of openness or closure of society, as already noted by classical authors.

Suggestions for further studies can be drawn from the limits of the quantitative data currently available in Italy. An extension of the study to cohabiting couples and same-sex couples would be interesting to understand the phenomenon more broadly. In addition, analyses would benefit from having information on population groups that make specific use of technology to find a partner (for example, divorced, elderly, single parents, people with disabilities, and people with specific orientations and sexual interests) (Baym, 2015; Sautter et al., 2010). It would also be interesting if there were samples large enough to allow the multivariate analysis of individual characteristics - particularly stratification factors such as social class, education, age, and territorial affiliation (Cacioppo et al., 2013; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012; Lampard, 2020).

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

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