The Demography and Social Gradient of Online Dating in Italy

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Topic and Aim

The digital revolution has reshaped multiple aspects of everyday life, including how individuals meet, form romantic relationships, and maintain them. The use of Online Dating Services (ODSs) to find romantic partners has become increasingly widespread, and the proportion of couples whose initial encounter occurred online has risen substantially. This study investigates the socio-demographic characteristics of online daters and of partners who first met through ODSs in Italy, where research on the subject is scarce. It does so by consulting a novel, nationally representative survey that provides extensive and detailed information on online dating behaviour and on couples formed by partners who first met online. The study aims to assess dynamics of selection into partnership and online dating, and to identify their implications for the dating market structure and assortative mating.

Background

ODSs offer users several features that make dating practices substantially different from traditional offline modes of meeting and partnering. They are particularly advantageous for individuals facing thin dating markets and limited opportunities for meeting potential partners in conventional contexts (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Understanding who uses ODSs is crucial, as systematic differences between users and non-users can bias analyses of online dating dynamics if not properly accounted for (Potarca, 2020). Moreover, disparities in ODS use lead to unequal representation of socio-demographic groups within the online environment and directly influence the structure of the dating market, which in turn shapes meeting opportunities and dynamics (Kalmijn, 1998). Ultimately, market constraints and social heterogeneity affect patterns of assortative mating (Blau et al., 1982).

Findings on the socio-demographic characteristics of online daters are often inconsistent. Men are frequently found to use ODSs more than women, but the proportion of female users has also increased (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Castro et al., 2020). Online daters typically belong to younger cohorts, although high rates of ODS use are also reported among adults (Vogels & McClain, 2023). Regarding education, some studies report no association between educational level and online dating (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), while others find that most online daters possess upper-secondary or tertiary education (Vogels & McClain, 2023).

When considering partners who met online – namely, successful online daters – previous studies report a higher prevalence of women and younger individuals (Danielsbacka et al., 2019), as well as a lower prevalence of partners with tertiary education (Potarca, 2021). This suggests that the socio-demographic profiles of ODS users may not align with those of successful daters. Moreover, online dating may promote either homogamy or heterogamy by expanding opportunities to meet both similar and dissimilar potential partners. While research generally indicates that homogamy prevails among partners who met online (Lampard, 2020), online dating is often associated with higher levels of heterogamy compared with offline contexts (Thomas, 2020).

It is also important to consider that, beyond online dating, individuals may be selected into partnership along socio-demographic lines, with consequences on the likelihood of being single and at risk of using ODSs for partner search. In particular, the reversed gender gap in education (Van Bavel et al., 2018) has generated new imbalances in the dating market, with relevant consequences. On the one hand, low-educated men and women are expected to be particularly disadvantaged in the offline dating market (Sturm & Van Bavel, 2024) and thus may be more likely to engage in online dating. On the other hand, low-educated men and tertiary-educated women are assumed to face a shortage of similarly educated potential partners (Corti & Scherer, 2021), making ODSs a viable alternative. Finally, new educational equilibria are expected to influence assortative mating patterns (De Hauw et al., 2017).

This study addresses the following research question: To what extent do socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education) predict the likelihood of (a) being partnered, (b) using online dating services, and (c) forming a union through them?

Based on the existing literature, we expect to identify two distinct patterns of selection – into partnership and into online dating (H1). Furthermore, we expect individuals who are disadvantaged in the dating market and face structural constraints – low-educated individuals, particularly men, and tertiary-educated women – to be more likely to use ODSs (H2). Lastly, we expect successful online daters (partners who met online) to differ socio-demographically from ODS users overall, with women, younger individuals, and those with intermediate education more likely to form relationships online (H3).

Data and Methods

The analysis draws on data from the Age-It Fertility and Family Survey, conducted in 2025 in Italy among a nationally representative sample of 9,004 cisgender, heterosexual individuals aged 18 to 45. The survey covers a wide range of topics, including partnership histories, through questions on respondents' current and previous marriages, cohabitations, and living-apart-together arrangements.

1. Selection into Partnership and Online Dating

In the first part of the analysis, online dating is measured through three questions regarding the use of dating websites, dating smartphone apps, and generalist social media platforms for partner search in the previous twelve months. Response options – "Never", "Sometimes", "Often", and "Very often" – capture frequency of use. Respondents are grouped into three categories. First, they are classified as partnered or single. Subsequently, single individuals are further categorised as *online daters* if they reported using at least one ODS at any frequency, or as *not online daters* if they answered "Never" to all relevant questions.

Gender (male, female), age group (18–21, 22–29, 30–37, 38–45), and educational level (lower-secondary or below, upper-secondary, tertiary) are the key explanatory variables. Covariates include previous partnerships, occupational status (employed, not in employment, or student), country of birth, region of residence, residential area size, and parents' educational background.

Initially, the analysis considers the entire sample (N = 8,495). Using multinomial logistic regression, it assesses the likelihood of being in a partnership compared with being single and not an ODS user, and with being single and an online dater. The analysis is then restricted to single individuals – ODS users and non-users (N = 3,564) – to examine the specific pattern of selection into online dating through logistic regression. Finally, frequency of use is also taken into account by estimating the likelihood of being a frequent user – defined as using at least one ODS very often – using generalised ordered logistic regression (N = 2,237). The list of covariates remains constant across all three analytical stages. Particular attention is paid to the interactions between gender, age, and education.

2. Assortative Mating Among Partners Who Met Online

The second part of the analysis focuses on respondents who were married, cohabiting, or in living-apart-together (LAT) arrangements at the time of the interview. Partnerships are classified as either online- or offline-formed according to where partners first met. The relevant survey question provides eleven response options: eight offline settings (e.g., university, workplace, club) and three ODS-related contexts – dating websites, dating apps, and generalist social media – consistent with the previous section. The descriptive analysis compares the characteristics of online and offline partnerships, with particular attention to couple homogamy in terms of age and education. In the forthcoming stage of the research, the analysis will be extended through the application of log-linear models.

Results

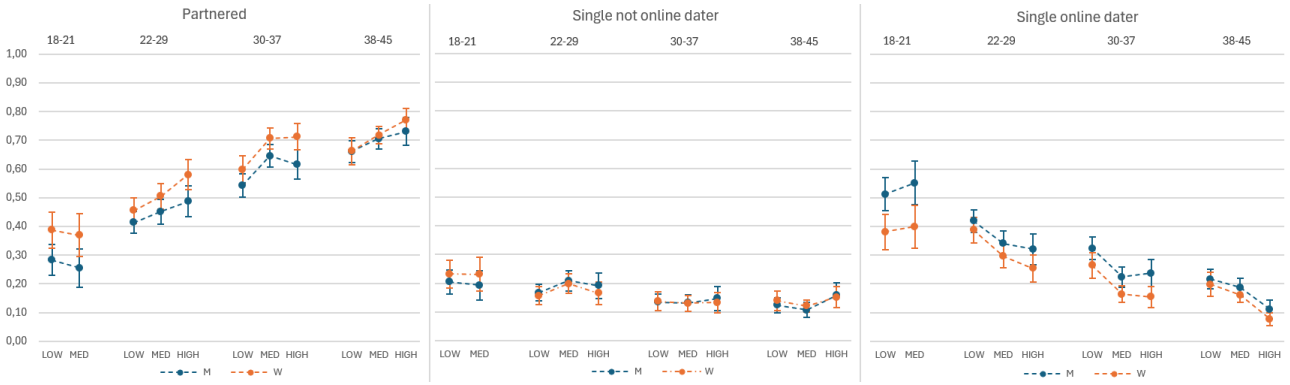
1. Selection into Partnership and Online Dating

Almost 60% of respondents in the sample are in a partnership. Among those who are single, 63% reported having used ODSs for romantic purposes in the previous twelve months, confirming the widespread diffusion of online dating in Italy. Specifically, 22% used dating websites, 30% used dating smartphone apps, and 60% used generalist social media, highlighting the importance of platforms such as Facebook and Instagram within the broader online dating phenomenon.

The initial analysis reveals clear patterns of selection into both partnership and online dating (see Figure 1). Women, adults, and tertiary-educated individuals have a higher likelihood of being in a partnership. These patterns are strongest among individuals aged 30 to 45 and those with tertiary education, while the gender effect is modest but statistically significant. The positive impact of education is consistent across genders, though slightly stronger for women, whereas the effect of age is more pronounced among men. While these factors do not significantly influence the likelihood of being single and not using ODSs, they are negatively associated with online dating, indicating an additional selection pattern beyond that related to partnership formation.

The analysis focusing on single individuals shows that, overall, men are more likely than women to use ODSs, as also observed in previous research. Age trends are non-linear: online dating is most common among individuals aged 18 to 29 and least common among those aged 38 to 45, among whom the strongest (negative) selection pattern emerges. Moreover, the negative age trend is more pronounced among women, resulting in the widest gender differences – and the greatest dating market imbalances – within the 38–45 age group. Regarding education, a clear negative gradient is observed. Tertiary-educated individuals, particularly women, display the lowest probabilities of using ODSs, whereas those with lower levels of education are the most likely to do so.

Figure 1 – Predicted probabilities of partnership, singlehood, and online dating by gender, age, and education



Source: Author's elaboration, data from the Age-It Fertility and Family Survey

Notably, the negative educational gradient in online dating does not vary by gender. For both men and women, the likelihood of engaging in online dating is highest among individuals with lower levels of education and lowest among those with tertiary education. This finding indicates a selection pattern into online dating based on education, operating alongside selection into partnership. Specifically, less-educated individuals are the least likely to be in a relationship and the most likely to use ODSs when single, whereas the opposite applies to tertiary-educated individuals.

Regarding age, gender differences are generally pronounced across most age groups, except for those aged 22–29. Within each age group, gender differences remain relatively stable across educational levels, reflecting the similar education-related trends observed among men and women. Although younger individuals are overall more likely to use ODSs, the trend is less consistent among men, among whom a clear linear negative age effect is not reported.

Consequently, in terms of unique users, men, younger individuals, and those with lower educational attainment are overrepresented in the online dating environment, whereas women, older individuals, and those with tertiary education are underrepresented. These disparities lead to differing probabilities of being encountered when using ODSs.

The subsequent analysis of frequency of use shows that women are generally more likely than men to be frequent users, except for young, low-educated men. Negative age and educational gradients persist among men, whereas they are largely absent among women. As a result, frequent female users tend to be overrepresented among the older and more educated subgroups, suggesting that frequency of use mitigates age- and education-related disparities among women, exacerbates them among men, and partially reduces overall gender imbalances within ODSs.

The results confirm the existence of two distinct patterns of selection – into partnership and into online dating (H1). Individuals aged 30–45 and those with higher educational attainment are the most likely to be partnered. Conversely, these groups are the least likely to be single and, therefore, potential ODS users. This indicates that the structure of the online dating market is, at least preliminarily, shaped by unequal partnership chances. Among single individuals, however, those aged 18–29 and individuals with lower education are more likely to engage in online dating than to abstain from it. This finding reveals a distinctive pattern of selection into online dating, specular to that observed for partnership formation and largely structured around educational attainment. In particular, individuals with lower education, who are least likely to have a partner, are also the most likely to use ODSs, whereas the opposite holds for those with tertiary education (H2).

These two selection processes result in unequal representation – and, consequently, unequal chances of being encountered – within the online dating market, with significant implications. Gender imbalances mean that men face greater competition and a smaller pool of potential partners. In this context, tertiary education enhances men's competitiveness, as it aligns with general desirability and the preferences of similarly educated daters. Conversely, less-educated men are more likely to be excluded, particularly by tertiary-educated women. Therefore, structural market constraints and individual preferences jointly tend to promote homogamous encounters among less-educated daters, widening social distance between groups. Less-educated women also face a risk of exclusion but remain relatively competitive due to fewer female competitors and a larger pool of potential partners. Among tertiary-educated daters, mutual preferences for educational similarity combined with numerical imbalances may constrain meeting opportunities, promoting hypergamous pairings rather than hypogamous ones.

2. Assortative Mating Among Partners Who Met Online

The analysis of respondents who met their partners online reveals a higher prevalence of cohabitation and LAT arrangements compared with offline partnerships, and a lower incidence of marriage. Furthermore, the proportion of online partnerships has increased markedly over the past two decades, confirming the growing diffusion of online dating in Italy. Women are slightly more likely than men to have met their partner online, despite their lower likelihood of being ODS users.

Contrary to expectations (H3), online partnerships are mostly formed by individuals aged 25-34. However, the proportion of online-formed couples relative to all partnerships increases among older cohorts. Age heterogamy is more frequent among online partnerships than among those formed offline; however, this is largely explained by couples in which the man is at least two years older than the woman, while less traditional arrangements – where the woman is older – remain rare.

As hypothesised (H3), partners who met online tend to have upper-secondary education. Although a notable proportion of online-formed couples involves less-educated individuals, the share of online partnerships is minimal among partners with lower education. In terms of educational assortative mating, couples who met online display a higher incidence of heterogamy than those who met offline, primarily driven by hypergamous arrangements. Nevertheless, this trend varies significantly over time: heterogamy predominates among online partnerships formed during the 2000s and 2010s, but it has become less common than homogamy among those established since 2020, suggesting the need to reassess the link between online dating and educational homogamy. Finally, hypergamy remains more frequent among online couples, whereas hypogamy is more typical of those who met offline.

In conclusion, online dating appears to be socio-demographically stratified in terms of access, use, and outcomes, with education emerging as the key differentiating factor. While ODSs offer new opportunities for partner search, they also tend to reflect and reproduce existing social inequalities, particularly regarding visibility, social interaction, and partnership formation. Ultimately, the socio-demographic composition of online daters and of partners who met online suggests that online dating does not promote educational heterogamy. Rather, the gender-neutral educational gradient and the consequent overrepresentation of lower-educated men and women are likely to reinforce offline patterns of social closure and reproduce them within the online dating market.

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