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Does the internet affect assortative mating? Evidence from the U.S. and Germany

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has now become a habitual channel for finding a partner, but little is known about the impact of this recent partnership market on mate selection patterns. This study revisits the supply side perspective on assortative mating by exploring the role played by online venues in breeding educational, racial/ethnic and religious endogamy. It compares couples that met online (through either online dating platforms, Internet social networking, Internet gaming website, Internet chat, Internet community, etc.) to those that met through various offline contexts of interaction. Using unique data from the U.S. for the year 2009 and data from Germany collected between 2008 and 2014, I run log-multiplicative models that allow for the strength of partners' association to vary along meeting settings. Results reveal that the Internet promotes weaker couple endogamy compared to conventional contexts typically known to foster endogamy, such as school, family, friends, or religious venues.

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1. Introduction

Mate selection and assortative mating (i.e., the nonrandom pairing of individuals with similar traits) depend on particular contexts of interaction (Bozon and Héran, 1989; Kalmijn and Flap, 2001; Lampard, 2007; Mollenhorst et al., 2008a). The pool of available partners supplied by certain social contexts and networks determines the extent to which individuals are able to match with people belonging to their own group. With significant parts of daily social life moving from offline to online venues, knowledge about the way in which the Internet as the most recent and increasingly prevalent setting of partner selection, influences assortative mating patterns compared to other contexts of interaction is increasingly needed.

The ongoing shifts in work and family life (e.g., rise in non-marital partnerships and non-standard family forms (Billari and Liefbroer, 2010; Elzinga and Liefbroer, 2007); a later age of entry into the first formal union (Manning et al., 2014; Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008); increased labor market and residential mobility (Caldera Sánchez et al., 2011)), and the decline of traditional settings of meeting and mating such as family or school (Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012) mean that individuals become progressively more in charge with the process of finding a partner (Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008). Against this backdrop, the Internet as noteworthy dating environment surged in popularity, fundamentally changing the dating landscape and the process of relationship initiation. According to U.S. survey data, by 2005 more than 20% of heterosexuals met their partner online (Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012). Another survey-based study claims that between 2005 and 2012, more than one-third of U.S. marriages began via the Internet (Cacioppo et al., 2013). In

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Germany, online dating platforms (i.e., dating websites where people enroll with the specific purpose of finding a romantic partner) have witnessed a rapid surge, with approximately 5.4 million people seeking a partner online (Schulz et al., 2008). Attitudes towards the Internet as a suitable way to meet people and find a match have also grown more positive over time (Smith and Duggan, 2013). Despite the large interest it raises among scientists, media and general audiences alike (Sprecher, 2009), there is still limited understanding about the nature of relationships formed through the Internet as opposed to other partnership markets. Social relations initiated online are assumed to take on different forms than in traditional face-to-face settings, given that cyberspace provides distinct ways of communicating and interacting with others, non-mediated by typical third parties and unconstrained by physical boundaries (Houston et al., 2005; Merkle and Richardson, 2000). During the early stages of its development, the Internet was in fact the subject of optimistic predictions about its role in making ascriptive characteristics obsolete (Barlow, 1996; Castells, 2001). According to them, individuals' matching based on similar race or socio-economic status, known to prevail in segregated offline environments, would dissolve in the boundless space of the Internet. Skeptics, on the other hand, suggested that online dating¹ would reproduce existing patterns of assortative mating and that "the same type of people are meeting online as they do offline" (Henry-Waring and Barraket, 2008, p. 29). Studies examining partner preferences and first-stage contacting behavior in online dating platforms in both the U.S. and Europe have consistently revealed positive assortative mating in online partner selection, meaning a strong tendency to prefer or choose a partner that shares the same socio-economic, ethno-racial or religious background (e.g., Skopek et al., 2011; Lewis, 2013; Lin and Lundquist, 2013; Potarca and Mills, 2015; Robnett and Feliciano, 2011; Yancey, 2007, 2009). It remains unknown, however, whether the 'amount' of assortative mating decreases or increases in the context of digital dating markets compared to other places of meeting and mating. The question that guides this study is whether the online environment contributes to alleviating the typical social divides between groups by providing an unrestrictive space for partner selection, or whether it preserves social boundaries and even promotes more similarity between partners due to individuals' strong norm of endogamy and online opportunities for easily getting in contact with people from the same socio-demographic background.

This research aims to examine the extent to which online partnership markets foster couple endogamy in contrast to conventional offline settings of meeting by using recent survey data referring to how couples meet. To corroborate results across national contexts, the analysis relies on data sources originating from two Western countries where the Internet is a widely accepted and used channel for finding a partner, namely the U.S. and Germany (Cacioppo et al., 2013; Schulz et al., 2008). Based on the *How Couples Meet and Stay Together* survey in the U.S. and the *pairfam* and *DemoDiff* surveys in Germany, three of the most commonly studied types of endogamy, in connection to education, race/ethnicity, and religious background (Schwartz, 2013), are re-addressed. In this study, endogamy and related terms² are generically used to describe partnering within one's own group for both married and unmarried³ couples. Several types of meeting contexts are distinguished, including: the Internet (referring to online dating platforms, online communities, chat rooms, online social networks, online gaming etc.), family, friends, neighbors, leisure, the workplace, school, religious venues, or voluntary organizations.

The paper adds to the literature in several ways. First, it contributes to the recent line of studies examining the ways in which new technologies affect partner selection and romantic outcomes (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 2013; Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012). More broadly, it seeks to expand the underdeveloped literature on where people seek for mates and the importance of the social milieu in which relationships are forged in breeding particular mate selection patterns (Schwartz, 2013). Second, it provides the first comprehensive comparison between couples that met via the Internet and couples that met via offline meeting venues with respect to endogamy patterns. Using the same U.S. data source, the research by Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) offers novel insights into the differences between couples that met via the Internet and couples that met via family intermediaries. Nonetheless, the authors' examination does not extend beyond the Internet – family comparison and is also based on analyses that do not account for variation in the distribution of partners' characteristics. The current study improves upon these limitations by contrasting online settings to more than one offline setting, and by performing analyses that are more appropriate for the structure of the data, as described in the Methods section. Finally, the current research draws conclusions about endogamy patterns characterizing both U.S. and German couples. Relying on two data sources ensures a broad empirical reach and the opportunity to examine the cross-national generalizability of the link between digital partnership markets and couple endogamy. Despite differences in demographic and institutional factors that might impact the composition of general partnership markets in the two countries (e.g., a lower age at marriage in the U.S. (Soehl and Yahirun, 2011), a greater propensity and social legitimacy associated with non-marital cohabitation (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004), and more generous family policies (Gangl and Ziefle, 2009) in Germany), previous studies identified the profile of Internet daters to be similar in both the U.S.

¹ Throughout this study, online/Internet dating refers to finding a partner in either one of the following online settings: online dating platforms, Internet social networking, Internet gaming website, Internet chat, Internet community etc. When solely referring to dating websites that provide a platform for their members to select and get in contact with potential partners, the expression 'online/Internet dating platforms' will be used.

² Whereas 'endogamy' is a typical term used to describe the choice of a partner belonging to the same (racial/ethnic or religious) group, 'homogamy' is a more common term when referring to matches between partners with a similar level of education (Schwartz, 2013). Nonetheless, the term 'homogamy' is only used when referring to previous studies of educational similarity between partners. Elsewhere, the term 'endogamy' is preferred given the simplification of educational group categories used in this study's analysis instead of the complete ordinal spectrum of educational attainment.

³ Unmarried couples include either cohabiting or living apart together partnerships.

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